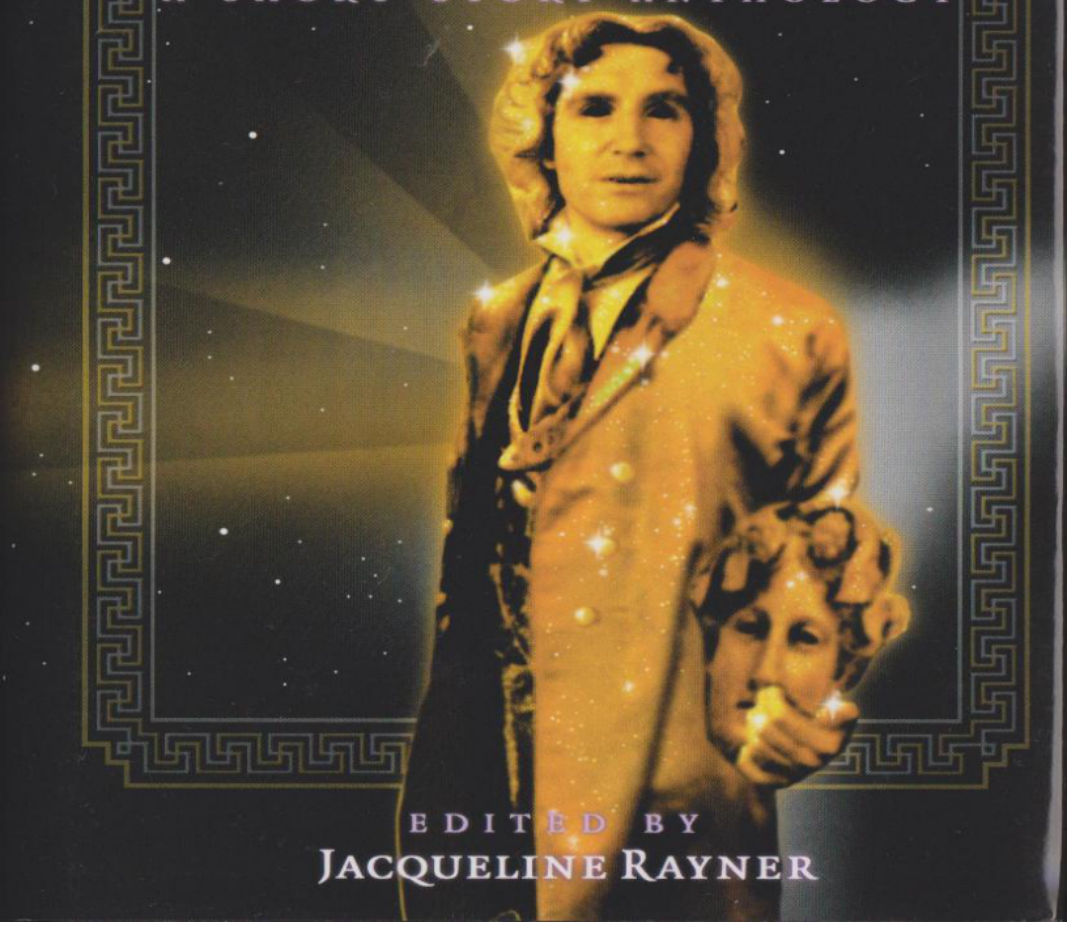
BIG FINISH

DOCTOR WHO

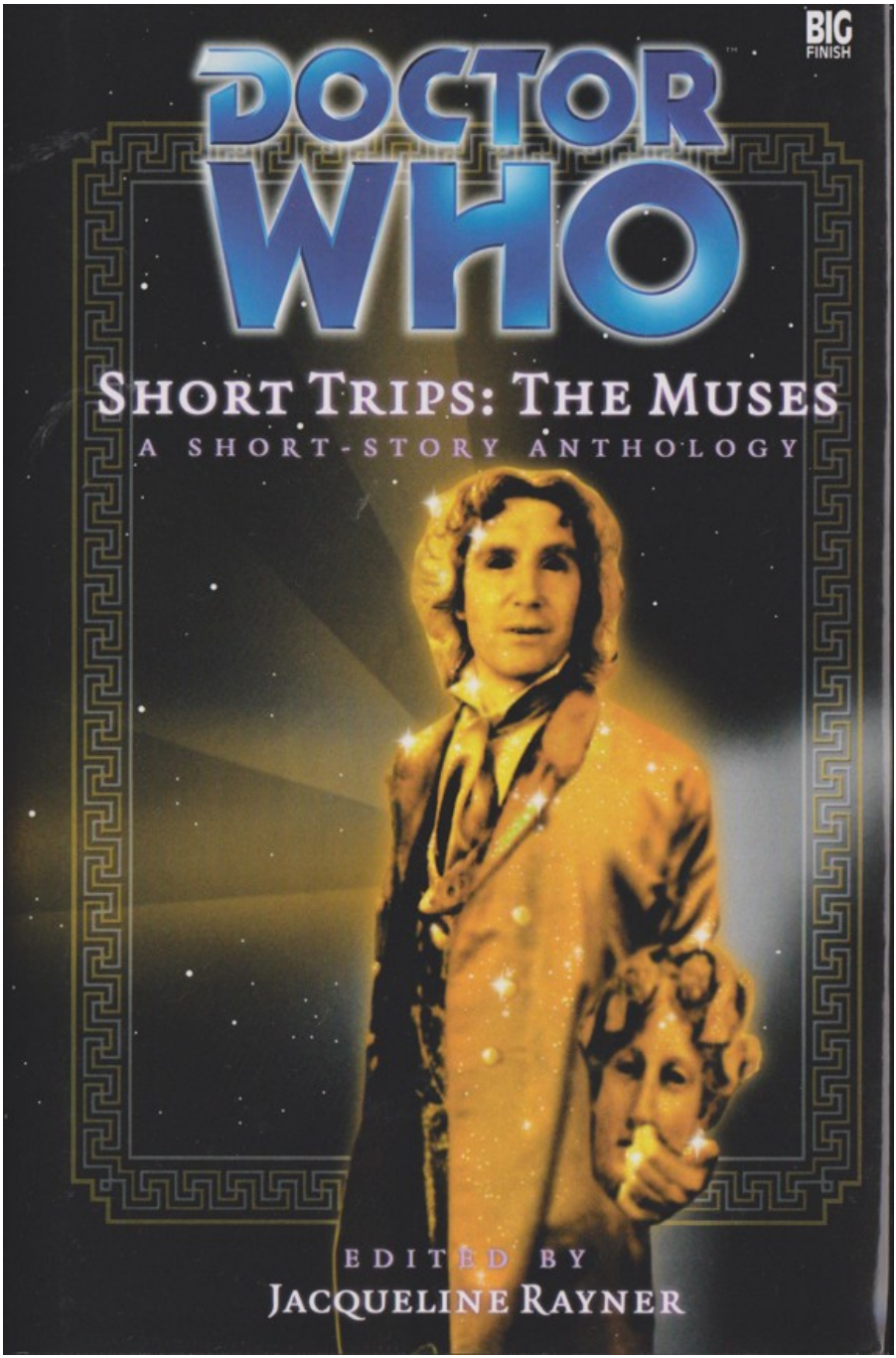
SHORT TRIPS: THE MUSES

A SHORT-STORY ANTHOLOGY



EDITED BY

JACQUELINE RAYNER


BIG FINISH
DOCTOR WHO
SHORT TRIPS: THE MUSES
A SHORT-STORY ANTHOLOGY
EDITED BY
JACQUELINE RAYNER

NINE BRAND NEW
ADVENTURES IN TIME AND SPACE!

SHORT TRIPS: THE MUSES

A SHORT-STORY ANTHOLOGY EDITED BY
JACQUELINE RAYNER

Tell me, O Muse, of that many-aspected hero who fled his home world to travel every corner of time and space. Tell me, daughter of Jove, of his battles and his tragedies, of the strangers he encountered and the evil plots he foiled. Speak with laughter, with tears, through songs and visions of the Doctor, the hero and champion of this world and many more.

The nine Muses have since ancient times brought inspiration to those willing to receive it. Nine authors have received the inspiration of the Muses, to speak of the mysterious Time Lord known only as 'the Doctor'. They will tell tales of History, of Dancing, of Comedy and Tragedy, of Sacred Poetry, Epic Poetry and Love Poetry, of Music and Astronomy. May they speak to your hearts.

Featuring stories by Gareth Roberts, Robert Shearman, Simon A. Forward, Steve Lyons, Justin Richards and more!

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(11. 75-103) These things, then, the Muses sang who dwell on Olympus, nine daughters begotten by great Zeus,

Clio and Euterpe, Thalia, Melpomene and Terpsichore, and Erato and Polyhymnia and Urania and Calliope,

who is the chiefest of them all, for she attends on worshipful princes: whomsoever of heaven-nourished

princes the daughters of great Zeus honour, and

behold him at his birth, they pour sweet dew upon his tongue, and from his lips flow gracious words. All the people look towards him while he settles causes with true judgements: and he, speaking surely, would soon make wise end even of a great quarrel; for therefore are there princes wise in heart, because when the

people are being misguided in their assembly, they

set right the matter again with ease, persuading

them with gentle words.And when he passes through

a gathering, they greet him as a god with gentle

reverence, and he is conspicuous amongst the

assembled: such is the holy gift of the Muses to men.

For it is through the Muses and far-shooting Apollo that there are singers and harpers upon the earth;

but princes are of Zeus, and happy is he whom the

Muses love: sweet flows speech from his mouth. For

though a man have sorrow and grief in his newly

troubled soul and live in dread because his heart is distressed, yet, when a singer, the servant of the

Muses, chants the glorious deeds of men of old and

the blessed gods who inhabit Olympus, at once he

forgets his heaviness and remembers not his sorrows at all; but the gifts of the goddesses soon turn him away from these.

Hesiod, *Theogeny* (tr. Hugh G. Evelyn-White)

1

TERPS I CHORE

The Muse of Dance

Teach Yourself Ballroom Dancing

Robert Shearman

I

Becky had dreamed she was dancing again. The bottom sheet had been kicked off altogether, and the duvet had been twisted into so many knots around her legs it looked as if she'd been trying to throttle them. She grunted. It left her so exhausted, all that high kicking and swinging and night-time pas-de-deux-ing. No wonder David now chose to sleep in the spare room so often. She splashed some water on her face, brushed her teeth, and it wasn't until she'd stopped rinsing and started spitting that she remembered it was her birthday.

Becky didn't like birthdays. It wasn't getting old that bothered her.

Anyway, she was thirty-eight, that wasn't old, that wasn't even *nearly* old, forty might be old, but she wasn't forty yet, was she, was she? No, what annoyed her was how disappointing birthdays always were.As a girl, she'd seen them as Something Very Special, and nothing could possibly go wrong to spoil that. Birthdays made you all-powerful, even complete strangers had to be nice to you, it was as if you had a halo round your head for twenty-four hours. Of course, she'd still get homework, still get maths tests, still get bullied if she dared venture into the forbidden corners of the playground - but she could *pretend.* It was her birthday, and she was untouchable.

She was half pleased that David hadn't left her a birthday card. She was half annoyed too - but that was David to a tee. She had a shower, even though it only meant she'd have to get dry again, put on some make-up, though eventually it would have to come off. She considered having her one cigarette of the day, then decided she would stand more chance of enjoying it a bit later. She got dressed, got into the car, got to work.

For one childlike moment she thought that the little note waiting for her inside the studio was a birthday card after all. But it was a note from the caretaker telling her the central heating had packed up. Not a clue as to why, or what he proposed to do about it. And he hadn't spelled

`heating' right either.

Ìt is a little chilly, isn't it?' said the intruder, and he flapped his arms by his sides as if to exaggerate the point. His coat certainly looked warm, though - big and thick and composed of a dozen mismatching bright colours:The caretaker said I could wait; he said cheerfully:I had to charm him a bit, but he said yes in the end.

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The caretaker Becky knew was an untrusting little sod who hadn't once in the five years she'd been renting the studio so much as smiled at her.

He took security very seriously, and obviously saw it as a huge imposition that, in order to teach her pupils, she had to get inside his building in the first place. The idea that this eccentrically dressed stranger could have charmed him one iota was ludicrous, and she determined to tell him so, right there and then. 'Oh, he did, did he?' she said.

`You're a dance teacher, aren't you?'

`Yes.' She was wary but saw no reason to deny it.

The man spoke to her, quite confidentially. 'I'd like to dance, you see.' He paced around the room, looking at the little posters of stickmen figures performing *plies* and painful-looking *arabesques.* 'My friend Peri has gone off for a few days visiting friends, left me rather kicking my heels. I've looked around, and there's no alien invasions I can foil. So I thought I might as well learn a new skill. I've always rather fancied trying my hand at ballroom dancing or pottery.' By now he'd finished

looking at the posters, and was facing her again, beaming at her with a wide smile. 'I plumped for dancing.'

Àlien invasions?' she repeated numbly.

He frowned. 'No, no alien invasions, that's the point. Do try to keep up'

And then he smiled at her again, to show he hadn't taken offence, and that she had no reason to either.

Ì teach ballet to young girls. Not ballroom dancing to middle-aged men'

He stuck out his bottom lip, and looked as if he were going to sulk.Then the clouds lifted from his face, as if he'd just found a solution to the problem. 'Oh, go on,' he said.

`No.

`Just for a little while'

`No. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to get ready. My class will be here soon' She waved the register at him pointedly, and the man gave it a cursory glance.

'I don't suppose it would do any good to say I have lots of money.' He looked embarrassed at the admission.Ì mean, you can have it. If you want'

He took her hands, and Becky was so surprised she didn't pull away.

Took,' he said, 'this is important. I can't promise you that the fate of the universe hangs in the balance, even that lives are at stake. I don't know *why* it's important. But I feel it is. Really. Please,' and he looked imploringly into her eyes, 'teach me how to foxtrot.'

As the day wore on - and wear on it did - Becky found herself thinking back to the peculiar stranger. She had been a little worried he wouldn't take no for an answer, but on her next refusal he had nodded, smiled, and left.The little girls in her care spent the day bobbing up and down, one of them even did the splits. During the lunch break they giggled and ran 6

around and pulled each other's hair, whilst Becky stood outside, toying with her unlit cigarette and trying to recall just what she had

seen in the stranger's eyes that had been so mesmerising. It went without saying that none of her ballet students had eyes half so interesting. Or that none of them thought to wish her a happy birthday before she drove back home that evening.

`Happy birthday, Bex,' said David.

Only David called her Bex. Once she had thought it was her husband's own personal pet name for her. Now she suspected it was because he hadn't got the energy to master a whole two syllables.

`Good day?' he asked.

Àll right,' she said. 'Yours?'

Àll right: They never discussed their jobs. He didn't have any interest in ballet. And she had none in the actuarial branch of management consultancy. He gave her a birthday card, which had a picture of flowers on the cover. 'Because you like flowers,' he explained. He had chosen one where the verse inside was so long it didn't leave much room to write a personal greeting. So he hadn't.

He took her to her favourite restaurant - an Italian on the high street she didn't particularly like - and bought her a bottle of her favourite wine

- a cheap house red she had no strong feelings about either way. He ordered the spaghetti bolognaise. She fancied the vegetarian lasagne.The waitress clicked her tongue in irritation, because it had to be made specially. By the time the lasagne arrived, he'd all but finished his meal, and smoked two cigarettes impatiently waiting for her to catch up. She made the mistake of saying she hadn't had her daily cigarette yet, and he suggested they could smoke together. But she didn't want to do it *together,* it was *her* daily cigarette, hers, not his, it was private and nothing to do with him. She supposed she'd said it a bit too emphatically, as the restaurant fell silent and he'd looked so offended, and they decided to skip dessert altogether and drive straight home.

Since he bought dinner, she supposed she should initiate sex that night.

She couldn't be certain, but she thought he fell asleep halfway through. It always made him terribly drowsy, whilst for her part the steely concentration involved would give her insomnia. She pushed his snoring body away, rolled on to her back, and thought about the

peculiar stranger with the peculiar eyes.

She wasn't particularly surprised to find him waiting for her again the next day. She was, though, by what he was holding.

`Flowers!' he declared. Tor you. It was your birthday yesterday, wasn't it?'

She took them. They smelled wonderful, the way flowers smell when you're a child. 'How did you know?' He shrugged, smiled. 'Well, it's very kind of you. But you have to run along now I've my class to teach.'

`They're not coming:

`What?'

`You wouldn't take my money. But your pupils did. Or rather, their parents. I got their names when you showed me the register. I went to see them all last night, paid them off.' He grinned at her. 'So now there's no reason why you can't teach me! Isn't that splendid?'

She threw her flowers at him One especially rich-smelling chrysanthemum bounced off his head. 'You don't interfere with my life,'

she said. 'Do you understand?'

He looked so immediately aghast that she wanted to put her arms around him and tell him it was all all right.Ì'm sorry,' he said.Then,Ì fixed the central heating'

They had to turn the central heating down a bit. 'If I'm going to teach you,' she explained, 'you're going to work hard. Do you understand? A few hours with me and you're going to be dripping with sweat' He nodded eagerly, and she blushed a little, and didn't quite know why.

`We'll start with the waltz,' Becky said. 'Nice and straightforward.

Everyone can do the waltz. But not everyone can do the waltz *well.'*

Ì want to waltz well,' said her new pupil promptly.

`Then do what I say.' She positioned him on the dance floor. ÒK. I want you to place your right hand here. Just below my left shoulder

blade.Yes, like that. And now raise your other arm... a bit lower, that's it, about my eye level. So I can rest my hand on it.' The man did all she asked, his brows knitted furiously in concentration.

Ànd now we are ready to dance' She smiled up at him. left foot out.

That's it.Then right foot out to join it.Then step a beat with the left. Good.

Now, *right* foot out. And *left* foot to join. And step with the right. One two two, you see. One two two, one two two'

They came to a stop.The man looked at her. And that's the waltz then'

She laughed gently. 'There's a little more to it than that.'

A couple of hours later, and they had meandered up and down the dance floor a good hundred times. He was a willing student, but frustratingly slow `You should be looking over my right shoulder,' she said lightly. 'Not staring at your feet all the time.'

Ìf I don't look at my feet,' explained the man a little irritably, Ì'm going to tread on yours.This is not a natural way to walk'

`That's where you're going wrong,' she said.`Don't think of it as a *walk*.

When you walk, you do it so you can reach a destination. There's no destination in dancing. When you dance, it's all just about the dance. The movement, the rhythm. The beauty of it'

She smiled at the student, and was surprised at how concerned he looked.

Ì'm warning you,' he said in a deathless whisper. 'If I don't look at my feet, I'm going to get it wrong. I know I will.'

`Get it wrong then'

`What?' He sounded genuinely baffled. Even affronted.

Ìt's what dance is all about. On the one hand, it's putting your feet in the right place at the right time. On the other, it's about doing what you feel like, ignoring what's right and wrong, forgetting where your feet should go, letting the rhythm take you.And then, quite by chance, fmding you're putting them in the right place at the right time

anyway: He looked at her as if she were mad. `You need to be less disciplined. Let yourself go'

And softly, 'Trust me,' she said.

He gritted his teeth, and nodded.

Òne two two. One two two. *Don't look at your feet!* One two two.

Look over my shoulder. Look at *me.* One two two. Look at me, all right?'

`Yes,' he said. 'I'm all right:

`You're more than all right,' she said. You're dancing'

And so he was. He laughed with delight. In the next hour he kicked her fifteen times. In the second hour he kicked her only twice.The lunch hour she'd planned came and went, she forgot her cheese sandwich and her daily cigarette. By half past two he was able to twirl without being told.

At three o'clock they lapped the room again and again, fast, faster, the student laughing breathlessly at his success, the teacher laughing at his laughter.

`Tomorrow,' she said, 'I'll bring some music. Not have to hear me say

"one two two" all the time.'

Àll right,' he said. 'Can I buy you dinner?'

She stood back, as if she'd been slapped.Ì'm a married woman,' she said.

Ì' m married'

He looked baffled. Which irritated her all the more. `Sorry,' he mumbled.

And in a flash Becky was reminded of David, who always apologised without ever quite knowing what he had done wrong.

That night, at home, David came to see her. (It really felt like that too - hècame to see her', as if craving an audience, as if it wasn't his house as well! How she hated that!) 'Sorry about last night,' he said.

`What about last night?'

`The argument. You know, in the restaurant. I didn't mean what I said.

It's just that... just lately... just lately, Sex... you seem so remote. You don't want to talk any more. Do anything any more. Not really'

Ì don't remember an argument,' she said. Quite cheerfully, she thought.

And, thank God, he shut up.

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Before he left the room (Where did he go? It was his sitting room as well! Why did he hide from her?) he asked, 'What would you like for dinner tonight?'

Ì don't care.'

`Takeaway?'

`Why not?'

Becky was a little concerned that things might be awkward after their argument - except it wasn't an argument really, was it? A silly misunderstanding, that's all - after the misunderstanding the previous day. But instead his eyes were shining with enthusiasm. 'I've been practising,' he said.

She barely had time to pop her Strauss in the cassette player before he had waltzed her round the room. His feet made complex reinterpretations of the simple steps, he managed to be at once surprising as he spun her into new directions, but also reassuring, so her body always worked in concert with his. She had spent the previous day leading the dance, and gently encouraging him to be the man and take over - now he was wholly in control, yet never dominated. He gave her room to be inspired by his own creativity - and she rose to it gladly.

The music stopped. `Yes, I can see you have,' she said.And kissed him on the cheek.

He didn't seem to notice. 'That's the waltz mastered then'

`Yes'

`So. What's next?'

She hadn't ever expected there to *be* a next. A few days of the *Blue Danube,* and that was it. 'The foxtrot,' she said decisively. 'How does that suit you?'

His face still flushed with success, he nodded happily.

Ìt's more complicated than the waltz,' she explained, 'but after your progress I'm sure it won't give you much difficulty.Take me in your arms, just as before.And this time the steps aren't only about position, but about tempo. Slow-slow quick-quick'

They gave it a go.After about ten minutes, Becky broke out of his hold.

`You're looking at your feet again! Why are you doing that?'

`But it's a new dance...'

Ìt's as if I've taught you *nothing.* It's not mechanics. I thought you realised that. It's about what you *fee/.* Don't you feel anything?'

Her student looked so hurt by her outburst that she quite resolved that night she *would* let him take her out for a meal. He deserved that much.

In fact, she'd resolved it early that morning, when she'd left David a note explaining she wouldn't be back home till late, inventing an old schoolfriend in the process. After a few hours of cautious foxtrotting, it 10

became clear that the student wasn't *going* to invite her to dinner. So she dropped a few hints, each one blunter than the last.

Eventually he frowned, almost mid-trot. 'Wait a moment,' he said. 'I thought you were married.'

`Well. It's only dinner, isn't it?' She laughed girlishly.

`Yes...'

`Not as if we're having an affair or anything!' She laughed girlishly again.

`True,' he agreed. He finished that bit of trotting, and asked, 'What's your favourite restaurant?'

`Let's not go there,' she said. 'Let's go somewhere nice for a change.'

And so it was, only a couple of hours later, Becky and her new friend were perusing menus in a darkened Italian a good five miles out of town. He had suggested they ask the waiter to turn the lights on; she assured him it was nice with the candles. She ordered a vegetarian lasagne. He studied the menu seriously, then ordered exactly the same. She ordered a bottle of the most expensive red wine the restaurant had - why not live a little? she asked, and again with the girlish laughter. The man agreed cheerfully, and ordered an extra large helping of iced lemonade.

`Tell me,' she said. 'We haven't met before, have we? It's just I get the funniest feeling when I'm with you...'

Ì've met so many people,' he said blandly. 'But I don't think so. I think I'd have remembered'

She shook her head, as if to clear the cobwebs. 'I'm sure you're right'

She smiled. Ì feel sure I'd have remembered you too'

She sipped her wine, he chewed an icecube.The lasagnes both arrived at the same time, and both were excellent.'It's odd,' she said suddenly. Ì've never even thought to ask you your name. Why is that?' He didn't answer.

`So, what is it?'

Ì' m usually known as the Doctor.'

`But that's not a name'

No.That's a secret.`That seemed all he was going to say on the subject, and then changed his mind. 'Oh, why not?'And he told her.

She laughed out loud. 'It's not, really?'

He nodded, a little shamefaced. 'I tell everyone it's too long and unpronounceable. That usually shuts them up' And then he laughed too.

`There. You know one of my secrets. Very few know that' He considered this slowly. 'In fact, I'm not sure there's anyone else left alive who knows that,' he murmured to himself.

Becky took a gulp of wine.'Would you like to know my secret?'And she

didn't wait for an answer. In the scheme of things, it wasn't much of a secret, but it was hard for her to say out loud, she'd been holding it in for so, so long now, and it took a good twenty minutes. She began to cry; she 11

apologised for crying. And the Doctor said nothing all the while, never taking his eyes from her, never blinking, meeting her gaze when she looked for it, letting hers drop when she needed that.

And once she'd told him that secret, that simple secret which she'd never be able to tell David, not ever, it would hurt him *so much,* she told him other secrets too. How she had always wanted to be a ballet dancer, right from when she was a little girl, but she hadn't pushed herself hard enough, or David had got in the way, yes, that was it, he'd got in the way and she'd settled for less than she should have. And now she'd *never* be one, not a real one, teaching little girls forever, she hated little girls, she'd never be a real ballet dancer, not now she was so old and pushing forty.

And she told him the other secret. Her new secret.The way she felt about *him.* The way she *thought* she felt about him, she'd only just met him after all, she had no idea how he felt about her, could he think he could feel what she thought she felt?

He drove her back home - as Becky said, it wasn't that she was drunk, she was just a little tired. She asked him to get out early, and let her drive the last few hundred metres into the drive. He asked why. 'Because,' she said.

I'll practise my foxtrot,' he said solemnly, and she laughed in spite of herself.

`You're very dear,' she said.And kissed him on the cheek. Good night...

Doctor.'

`Good night, Rebecca'

`You called me Rebecca! No one calls me that...!'

'Do you mind?'

`No, I like it. Or, rather, I like it from you' She would have kissed him on the cheek again, but he was out of the car door and lost in the darkness.

David was already asleep in the spare bedroom. He had left her a note saying he hoped she'd had an enjoyable evening.

She worked out that she hadn't smoked her daily cigarette for three whole days. And so smoked three in quick succession to catch up. And then smoked three more, just for good measure. Then she thought, what the hell. She sat up for hours and smoked her throat raw.And hoped that she'd see the Doctor tomorrow.

II

It was another eighty years before the Doctor saw Becky again. Eighty years his time, that is - he did a quick calculation in his head and worked out it was a couple of dozen years in her past. He was some time in the 1970s, and helping out a paramilitary organisation repel a new Auton invasion. He'd have turned to UNIT, but he was pretty sure he was already 12

o

working with them in some previous incarnation repelling something else altogether, and he didn't want to get in everyone's way. He didn't like this bunch as much, but the chap standing next to him had a brisk manner and trim moustache, and the Doctor found that nicely reassuring.

`So the invasion is set for Thursday next week? My men are standing by.`

The lance corporal grunted irritably as a teenage couple pushed past him on the pavement, wholly oblivious to anyone but each other. They stopped, kissed, laughed, ran on. The Doctor looked after them thoughtfully.

`Doctor?'

`What? Oh yes, yes. Thursday week' The girl and the boy disappeared around the corner. He began to follow them.

`Doctor? Where are you going?'

As you say, lance corporal,' said the Doctor, 'there's nothing we can do for a few days. I think we've earned some respite.And I've got unfinished business

to attend to.Ànd with an idle wave, the Doctor was gone.

The lance corporal's moustache twitched, and he looked almost comically put out. But since there was no one around to see, he pulled himself together, and went back to doing whatever members of paramilitary organisations do when they're waiting for something exciting to happen.

t,, Becky liked birthdays. It wasn't getting the presents - which, though fun unwrap, usually turned out to be evidence her mother still thought she was just a kid. No, what was special was that this was the one day her mother couldn't nag her, couldn't give her chores, couldn't give her a hard

' time about getting up late and staying out after dark. Her mother liked to

" pretend for one day of the year that her daughter was her trusted best friend, that they'd never had a cross word in their lives. And Becky intended to exploit that to the full.

Indeed, she'd already drawn up provisional plans of lazing round the house watching telly, followed by lazing round the shopping precinct snogging David. Instead, here she was, standing in some pokey dance studio with a fat man intent on teaching her the waltz.

`You've won a prize! You've won a prize!' her mother had exclaimed when she came down the stairs, so excited you'd have thought *she'd* won the bloody thing. And there was this strange man in silly clothes -

genuinely artistic, you can tell! her mother had whispered to her -

" beaming at her and saying, 'Congratulations, Rebecca!' It turned out she'd

■ entered a birthday draw - not that she remembered - and had chosen dance lessons as a prize - not that that seemed likely.And this funny man, who barely looked capable of breaking into a jog let alone a lambada, was going to take her away and teach her all week. She was most surprised by 13

her mother, a woman so suspicious of men that she wouldn't collect the milk from the doorstep until she was certain the milkman was half a street away.This Doctor had certainly charmed her.Well, it wasn't going to work on Becky.

`We'll start with the waltz; he had said. 'Nice and straightforward.

Everyone can do the waltz. But,' he had added, his eyes twinkling, 'not everyone can waltz *well.'* He'd paused, as if expecting her to say something.

`Yeah, whatever,' she'd mumbled.

Her problem, thought the Doctor, was that she didn't look at her feet enough. He'd teach her the moves, but she would dance *around* them, not quite obeying the rhythm, always finding a rhythm she preferred.`You need to be more disciplined.To rein yourself in,' he said, and she glared at him. He looked at her face carefully. It was still recognisably the same person, but her face was a little fatter and less lined. Her eyes weren't as bright as when he'd last seen her, but he supposed it might be because she was now sober.

"That's better, Rebecca.You're getting the hang of it'

`Don't call me Rebecca. I'm sick of it. Everyone calls me Rebecca'

Ì' m sorry.'

They broke for lunch. She munched on her daily chocolate bar, and didn't offer him a piece. She only allowed herself the one, she explained.

Otherwise she'd be fat and spotty and none of the boys would like her.

The Doctor asked if she had a boyfriend. She said no.

They waltzed again for a couple more hours, the Doctor teaching her the moves over and over so that one day she could teach them back to him. He found her a difficult pupil. If she got the moves right she was stiff and wooden. If she abandoned them, she'd loosen up, even begin to enjoy herself - and stomp all over his feet.

Are we going to be doing this all afternoon?' she asked.

Ìs there something you'd rather be doing?'

Ì said I'd meet David. Hang out with him for a bit'

Ì thought you said you didn't have a boyfriend'

`He's not a boyfriend. Not really. He's just someone I practise snogging with. For when I *do* get a boyfriend' She smiled with a sudden innocence the Doctor hadn't seen all day, and it all but broke his hearts. Ì'm getting quite good at it'

And off she'd gone, with promises she'd be back at ten the next morning, and would revise her lessons before going to bed. The Doctor mused to himself for a few hours, until the caretaker told him he wanted to lock up.And then he set off to look for David.

He eventually found him in a pub where they turned a blind eye to 14

underage drinking. The Doctor asked him if he could get him anything.

David chose a pint of cider. The Doctor settled for an iced lemonade.

`Cheers,' said the Doctor.

He told him that he had good reason to believe that one day David would marry Becky. And the Doctor wanted to ask him not to. Because David would just get in her way. She had dreams and ambitions, and to achieve them would take determination and courage, and David would just suck it all out of her, he'd leave her empty and useless. 'It's not your fault, though,' he added, and crunched an icecube.

David was a little taken aback by this. And told the Doctor he had no intention of marrying anyone ever. But he wasn't going to be scared off his girlfriend, not even for a second pint of cider, thank you very much.

`She doesn't think she *is* your girlfriend,' the Doctor said.

`She will one day,' muttered David, as he downed his third pint.

Some time during David's fifth pint, and the Doctor's last icecube, the Doctor grabbed David by the arm with an intensity that seemed almost angry. Fine, the Doctor said. He wasn't going to give Becky up. Fine. But in that case, could he be a bit more dynamic Could he just *try*. Make her feel special, because she *was* special, didn't David agree? Don't just drift through her life, help shape it, help her make the most of it, support her, encourage her. More than that. *Inspire* her.

David said he'd certainly think about it.

Becky arrived at the studio the next morning at quarter to eleven. The Doctor imagined she'd broken her other promise too, and had spent more time practising snogging than waltzing. She was carrying a ragged collection of flowers which looked as if they'd been drunkenly ripped from various residential gardens and stuck together without

rhyme or reason. They'd been left in the porch for her to find, and she was quite taken with them.

Whether it was the flowers or not, Becky seemed calmer today.

Although the Doctor had to remind her of some of the bare essentials, her dancing was more fluid and she seemed more willing to listen to what he had to say.The Doctor still found in her face the stubborn resistance he'd been so dismayed by the day before, but now there was a self-mockery there which softened her features.At certain moments, when she clumsily put a foot wrong, or missed the beat, he recognised in her good-humoured exasperation something of the Rebecca he had once known.

By one o'clock they were waltzing clear across the dance floor, he swinging her, she swinging him. She gave a whoop of pleasure. She naturally took the position of leader, and he allowed her her head. At lunchtime she toyed with, but did not eat, her daily chocolate bar.

`What happens next?' she asked. If not exactly eager, then at least interested.

`We could do more waltzing,' he said.'Or move on to the foxtrot. But I'm warning you, it's tricky to get the hang of.'

She didn't seem to fmd it so. In fact, if anything, its more complex rhythm seemed to appeal. It was easier for her to take all the extra moves and timings and fit them into whatever she felt like doing in the first place.

Are you enjoying yourself?' he asked her at one point. She nodded. If not exactly enthusiastic, then at least eager.

Ì want you to be happy; he went on. 'When you reached out to me before... well, you haven't yet, but... I didn't know how to respond. I couldn't give you what you wanted. But I knew I could give you *something.* Somehow. One clay. I knew it *then,* you see. When I first met you. I didn't quite know why it was so important you taught me, but I knew it would matter later. I felt it then, that I'd be doing this now, that I'd affect your life in some way, or you'd affect mine. Do you see?' He'd let go of her, was no longer looking at her. `Do you see?' he asked again quietly, knowing of course that she didn't.

`There never was a birthday draw, was there?'

`No. I'm sorry.'

She supposed she should be scared of this strange man, who had lured her here under false pretences. But she couldn't be scared.Angry, yes. 'You don't interfere with my life; she shouted:Do you understand?' She threw the flowers at him. One especially downtrodden daffodil bounced off his head.

Ì knew you've always wanted to be a ballet dancer. I wanted to give you that. I...'

'I don't want to be a ballet dancer.'

`You do.That's what you always dreamed of.'

`When I was a little girl. Girl's stuff. Kids' dreams: She hesitated. 'We grow up, don't we?'

'So,' asked the Doctor softly, 'what *do* you want to do, Rebecca?'

She shrugged. 'Don't know.Work in a shop maybe:

`What sort of shop?'

`Don't know.' And he looked so immediately aghast that she wanted to put her arms around him and tell him it was all right, it was all all right.

`You weren't even teaching me ballet; she said, not unkindly.

Ì don't know any ballet.

`The waltz and foxtrot then. Then what would you have taught me?'

Ì don't know.The foxtrot is as far as I got:

Ì'll show you how to dance,' she said, 'proper dance.'

She turned on the cassette deck; the tape inside beat out a fixed foxtrot rhythm, but Becky was having none of that. She *danced.* She threw her head in time to the music in her head, which was better than the music 16

on offer, she swayed and bobbed and twisted from side to side. It should have looked ludicrous. It didn't. There was a joy to it, an unselfconscious love of movement, of what her body could do, of the shapes it could make.A knowledge that she was still young enough to

get away with this, a naivety that clearly didn't realise that wouldn't always be the case. She danced and laughed and laughed and danced. And eventually fell down, exhausted, but still laughing.

The Doctor clapped.

And she kissed him. She'd been aiming for his cheek, but something went wrong, just slightly wrong, and she got the lips, just for a second.And then she went.

The Doctor didn't expect to see her again. But he was in the shopping precinct a couple of days later. Outside Woolworth's he saw Becky and David kissing. They didn't see him - they both had other things to think about. He looked at them critically for a few moments. She was right, all that Practising had paid off - she was very good at snogging. David was stiff and awkward, and didn't know where to put his hands. His face bulged as if he were trying to blow up a balloon.

And in an instant the Doctor realised where he'd gone wrong. It should have been *David* to whom he'd given the dance lessons, not Becky.Taught him a little grace and poise. Something that would have offset the clumsiness of their future marriage. Some common interest they might have shared.

Oh well. Too late now

As he passed Marks and Spencer's, he thought in the shop window he **saw** a clothes dummy twitch. And he realised he'd done his sums wrong

- not next Thursday after all, but this Wednesday! He hurried off to find **the** military.

III

Becky had dreamed she was dancing again. She hadn't quite managed to kick off the bottom sheet, and the duvet wasn't so twisted that it couldn't be straightened back into shape in an instant. But she knew she'd been **dreaming** because of the pain in her legs. Her dreaming self did things that awake she wouldn't have dared contemplate. Every night Becky danced; every morning she woke up, suffering because of it.

For a moment she considered having her one painkiller of the day.Then **she** decided she stood more chance of enjoying it a bit later. (The doctor **had** prescribed her four a day, but Becky thought that

was needlessly excessive - one will be enough, she told him.)

It was her birthday, and Becky liked birthdays. She liked the way that she was able to say she'd beaten another year, that she'd made it to eighty-17

eight and wasn't dead yet. Her nurse,Tracey, such a sweet girl, told her off and said she was being morbid. But it wasn't morbid at all. Just truthful.

She genuinely enjoyed the fact she'd notched up a whole eighty-eight years, and was determined to hang on to life just so she could one day say she'd made eighty-nine too.

Of course, it would have been preposterous for her to have been expecting the Doctor to show up. But, somehow, she wasn't in the least bit surprised when he did.

`Hello, Rebecca; he said.

`Hello,' she replied, and called him by his proper name.

He smiled, rather bashfully. 'You remember?'

Òf course.'

Ì've brought you some flowers.À collection of blurred colours, she couldn't see them properly. look. He held them out closer, but not close enough. She sniffed at them, couldn't smell a thing. She smiled at him anyway.

`Beautiful,' she said. Tut them in the vase, there's a dear.' Tracey would like them, she thought.Tracey liked flowers.

She eased herself upwards in the bed, so she could face the Doctor properly. It hurt like hell, but as her chiropractor always told her, no gain without pain, Bex, no gain without pain. She didn't like her chiropractor much, and she didn't like being called Bex.

`How are you?' she asked, as she fought down the pain.

He sat down beside her. 'I think I'm dying,' he said. From anyone else she'd have found such an admission, from a healthy-looking man in his middle age, to a woman wracked with pain if she so much as smiled, to be a little insensitive. But not from him. She took his hand. He did look a bit pale. Even the colours on his coat seemed to have

faded somewhat.

`What's wrong?' she asked gently.

Ì've been everywhere and done everything; he said. Ì've fought battles you wouldn't believe. I've explored planets further away than human thought. I've done it all.' There was silence for a moment, and Becky wondered if she should say something. She waited instead. 'I've no travelling companions any longer. No soldier friends to help me.They've all gone now' Again a silence. 'I'm lonely; he said at last.

They sat there, holding hands, in the darkened bedroom. It was comforting to them both.

`How are you?' he asked at last.

Òh, I'm still going; she said.

`You're all right?'

Ì've been better. But I haven't given up yet.`

`What happened to David?'

Òh.' She thought back. 'We divorced. Eventually. Then he died. In the end.'

18

Ì'm sorry you were never a ballet dancer?

'Oh, my dear,' she said, and smiled. 'Don't you know, I wouldn't have been a very good one?'

`You don't know that.'

Ì know:

`You don't know that,' he repeated, quietly.

He didn't say anything for a while. She liked holding him there in the dark.

`You could come with me,' he said. 'There are places I could take you.

Zero gravity worlds.You could dance again Even now, you could still be a dancer.'

She smiled at him. He went on. Enthusiastic, like a puppy.

`You could be whatever you want to be. I could take you wherever you want to go. I've seen it all before, but I could see it through your eyes this time, it'd all be new And exciting. And fresh. Please,' he added, as an afterthought.

`Lean closer,' she said.À little closer than that.' He did so.And she kissed him gently on the mouth. Her lips were cracked and coarse and smelled of tooth decay. His lips tasted of fresh scent and were rich and soft and yielding.

`You'll have more battles to fight. I know. But you'll be fighting them without me.' They looked into each other's eyes, and this time, he was mesmerised by hers.

`Goodbye,' she whispered.

He nodded, stood up. And disappeared back into the shadows of the room, and out of her life.

She closed her eyes, went back to sleep.And dreamed she was dancing.

19

THALIA

The Muse of Comedy

21

The Brain of Socrates

Gareth Roberts

Grimmon's three eyes opened.

He saw the stars. Not the harsh brilliant dots he was used to seeing through the vision screen of his craft; the light of these stars was diffused by a planetary atmosphere. He took a deep, gulping breath. Yes, the sensors' final reading had been accurate. The air on this planet, though a little too thin by Jezark standards, could sustain him.There was a savoury scent that was almost pleasant. There was also the chirruping of insect life.Another detail from the sensor report flashed back to him This planet was inhabited by intelligent, if culturally primitive, creatures.

Slowly, he hauled himself upright, and flexed his claws and stubby tail.

A wave of acrid smoke blew past, and he turned to see the remains of his craft, shattered into three sections by the crash. Only the shock-absorbent padding of his pilot's seat had saved him from a similar fate. A couple of small fires in the navi-crystal housing were blowing themselves out.

Around him was a flat grassy plain, interspersed with patches of rock; there were also trees. It was hard to tell in the dark, but there seemed to be no sign of the primitives. Instinctively, Grimmon's hand slipped down to the blaster that hung at his waist. It was intact, and fully charged.

Memories of the moments before the crash flooded back to him. He had been with the third explorer patrol, on a routine survey mission to map the stars towards the edge of this small galaxy, when the vector stabiliser unit failed. A few seconds later, before he even had time to call for help from the other units, the navi-crystal had overloaded, thrusting him sideways through space at ever increasing speed.When the craft came out of its spin, he recalled his training, and instantly set the scanners to locate a nearby habitable planet.There was only one: a blue/green ball that was swathed in gorgeous white clouds. Grimmon broke the seal on the emergency navigational override, and battled to steer his dying ship to what would be its final destination.As the space pressure buffeted the tiny vehicle, all he could think of was Jezark, with its teeming cities, starports and supertechnology; the home he would surely never see again, even if he survived this desperate planetfall Then he blacked out.

A sudden, sharp crack snapped him back to the present. He darted behind one of the sections of the burnt-out hull, and then inched himself slowly forward across the ground, peering round the jagged edge of his cover.

Two primitives were advancing from behind one of the outcrops of rock.They were humanoids, but that was the only reassuring thing about 23

their appearance. Their limbs were spindly and sticklike, and they were horrifyingly pale, with eyes that glinted with energy and purpose.Almost comically, there were patches of hair on the tops of their heads and their faces. They were dressed in simple white cloth garments, secured by coloured bands at the waist. They carried long

spears with sharpened ends, like stakes, and they advanced cautiously towards the ship.

Grimmon recalled the sensor report.These creatures had been surveyed on a previous Jezark patrol, and were classified as promising intelligence.

They were also signs that they had been visited regularly by the Old Civilisations. Surely, then, they would respond to his plight and give him shelter? Perhaps they might have developed a little since the survey? He hardly dared hope they might have progressed to a stage where they might be able to help him escape.

He stood slowly, switching on his translator. I am Patrol Pilot Grimmon, out of Jezark,' he announced in what he hoped would be taken as a friendly tone.At the same time he raised his claws to show them he meant no harm. 'My arrival on this planet was not intended -'

The two primitives screamed, and both threw their spears. The points bounced harmlessly off Grimmon's suit, but his own automatic response was to whip the blaster from his belt and fire.The primitives were caught in the beam, and even though it was on its lowest setting, their spindly bones were caught for a second in the brilliant glare before disintegrating into a fine powder.

Grimmon sighed heavily.The primitives had not developed.At least that meant, if these two were typical, they posed no threat to him Curious, he strode past their remains and rounded the large rock they had emerged from Immediately, the wind blew stronger on his tough mottled green skin. Beyond the rock was a view of a habitation, some distance away. Beyond a dense ring of trees, he saw a large cluster of wooden dwellings. At their centre there was a raised area, a small hill, on which stood a large white construction, arranged with surprising simplicity and beauty. Small firelights picked out its circular pillars.

`So - this is to be my home,' said Grimmon, staring at the city of Athens.

Leela entered the TARDIS control room, still a little uncomfortable in the light linen tunic she had been given to wear. It fell to her ankles, and the material was fastened by two large pins at the shoulders.A pair of sandals completed the outfit.Also, she had followed the Doctor's instructions, and using the sketch he had given her as reference, had pinned her hair up in a large bun at the back and tied it with ribbons.The costume was light and practical, allowing her

freedom of movement, but she couldn't help feeling a little self-conscious.

`Doctor,' she called.

24

He looked up from the wooden-framed console and nodded. Artemis: he said, and turned back to the controls.

Leela joined him at the console. Artemis?'

'She was a mighty huntress too.A goddess, in fact.'

`But you don't believe in gods'

`Where we're going, they do' He tweaked a control and the TARDIS gave l' a small lurch as he refined a co-ordinate. 'And when in Athens, do as the Greeks do'

Leela frowned:Then why are you not dressing as a Greek, Doctor?'

The Doctor pulled his scarf from the hatstand and started to loop it I' round his neck, looking slightly evasive. 'Because I look silly in a chiton,`

`You look silly anyway,' grumbled Leela. She felt the familiar winding-

! down of the TARDIS's engines as it started to materialise, reached for the crossbow in the corner, and started to check the bolt mechanism.

The Doctor

took it from her and shook his head.

'Why?' she protested:You said there were hunters here'

'There are. But not with crossbows.`

Leela reached for the Tesh gun she had brought from her own planet.

'Good, then I shall take this.`

The Doctor took the gun from her. 'Even more anachronistic. One of these days, I'm going to give you a proper history lesson'

`That's what you said you were about to do!' said Leela.

`Good,' said the Doctor. 'How very organised of me:

Leela stamped her foot in frustration,Òne of these days I shall give ***you***

a lesson, Doctor. None of the things you say follow one another!'

The Doctor raised a knowing finger, and turned his attention back to the console, deftly manipulating the controls as the TARDIS shuddered to

a halt. Àh!' he cried. 'That's exactly why ***I'm*** giving the lessons. You see, you have a terribly literal mind'

'Literal?'

The Doctor sighed. 'Oh dear, this really is going to take time...' He started to unwind his scarf:You're undoubtedly intelligent - '

'Thank you'

`But with the miserable existence your people eked out as part of Xoanon's experiment, your mind has never been given the chance to flower.'

Leela felt downcast. 'Oh'

`You're far too serious,' the Doctor continued.

Am I?'

'There obviously wasn't time for many jokes in the jungle. That's why we're here: He replaced his scarf on the hatstand. 'Athens was the birthplace of comedy, and a lot of other things. Poetry, mathematics, Literature, philosophy, democracy. And a lot of pretty pots as well. You 25

name it, they thought of it' He pointed to the door. 'Some of the greatest minds in human history are out there'

Leela felt rather inadequate:And the greatest mind in Time Lord history is in here,' she said.

`What was that?' the Doctor asked suspiciously.

`Just a joke,' said Leela pointedly.

Hmmm

; said the Doctor as he flicked the door switch. He started winding his scarf around him again.

The Doctor and Leela emerged from the TARDIS into scorching heat, even though evening was coming on. Leela blinked and shielded her eyes, adjusting to the light and taking a naturally suspicious look around. The TARDIS had materialised back in the shade, and was sat as inconspicuously as possible in a corner formed by two adjacent wooden buildings. Before them was a rough roadway that wound down a slight slope to the right. Many more similar buildings could be seen around them, but the Doctor's attention was taken by a large white stone structure on a small hill about a quarter of a mile away. It was approached by a flight of white stone steps, and Leela could see men in white walking down into the town; already some of them were filing past, talking animatedly. In the distance she could hear the cries of animals; savoury smoke was drifting through the air.

Hmm, Bisto,' said the Doctor curtly.

`They are slaughtering beasts,' Leela observed.

`Sacrifices to their gods,' said the Doctor. 'There's a lot of ritual and local colour, but basically it's just an excuse for a really big barbecue.The priest says the rites, someone slits the poor creature's throat, then it's on to the fire.

The humans eat the tasty bits and leave the bones and gristle for their god'

`Like the feast of Xoanon,' said Leela.

Òh this lot are a good few rungs up from you Sevateem,' said the Doctor. He waved an expansive arm around. 'Ideal conditions for settlers and farmers.And what does farming do?'

Leela recalled a previous lesson. 'Gives you time to think. Instead of...

grubbing out a simple tribal existence'

Èxcellent; said the Doctor.Ànd seven sevens are?'

Leela sighed. 'Forty-nine:

The Doctor squinted up at the sun. 'I'd say we're just in time. Come on'

He hefted up his scarf - Leela noticed that he wasn't sweating, despite

his thick woollen coat - and set off in the direction taken by the Athenians.

`Just in time for what? Is there to be another barbecue?' Leela longed or proper meat instead of the strange wares of the TARDIS food machinèNo - there's going to be a show.'

26

The crowd swelled as the Doctor and Leela neared what the Doctor called the theatre. Leela was surprised; it seemed nothing like the theatre she had seen in London when they had battled Weng-Chiang. The seats were arranged in great circles, spreading outwards from a wide space lit by flickering torches - the sun was going down now - and what looked like a rough stone but at its centre. To Leela's relief, there were a few women dressed similarly to her dotted among the crowd, though they kept their faces hidden and turned to the ground.

Ì was starting to believe this to be a city only of men: she said.

`To all intents and purposes, it is,' said the Doctor, guiding her along one of the back circles.To Leela's annoyance, people were casting odd glances at her and not the Doctor, despite his outlandish garb. 'The girls are all indoors. Technically, you shouldn't be here, but then they probably think you're a courtesan I've hired for the evening'

`Courtesan ?'

`Lady companion'

`Why are women not permitted here?' asked Leela.

`Because you're fickle, inferior creatures'

Leela swelled up. 'I am inferior to no one!'

The Doctor laid a restraining hand on her arm. 'That's what they believe here'

Leela fumed. 'And this is supposed to be a place of great learning and democracy!'

`Try not to worry,' the Doctor advised. All cultures look odd from the outside. I seem to recall your shaman wearing a plastic glove on his head: facts,Èvery The theatre was now almost full.The Doctor outlined some more of the so often they put on a show here; three plays in a

day to mark a festival. Like this lot, we've sneaked in at the interval. The third play is usually a comedy. Draws in the crowd. If I'm right, we're going to get some Aristophanes. One of the first and greatest writers of comedy in all human culture'

Leela noticed a man with a wooden board round his neck, moving between the aisles selling small oily fish. They smelt strong and salty. The Doctor reacted to her grumbling stomach by taking a familiar crumpled paper bag from his pocket and handing her one of his jelly babies. Leela looked on wistfully as the fish-seller passed by.

She bit into the jelly baby,`This is not proper food'

Ì know what you mean,' said the Doctor. 'You know, I could murder a kebab'

Leela frowned.'You say murder is wrong.Who are these kebabs? Aliens?'

`Sssh; said the Doctor,Ìt's time for curtain up:

Leela could see no curtain, but the crowd was falling quiet as a tall figure in long robes and a huge mask strode into the centre of the central area.

27

Leela spent the next hour in a state of utter confusion.A collection of similarly masked figures strode out from the but at intervals, barking and singing alternately. Their words were often long and unfamiliar to her. She tried to follow the plot but was soon hopelessly lost. It seemed to involve a foolish old man called Strepsiades, who was hopelessly in debt (the Doctor had explained debt to her once, with the aid of a sheaf of things he called 'unpaid credit card bills' in the name of Dr John Smith).

Strepsiades had decided to consult Socrates, the wisest man in Athens, for advice on paying off his bills, and found the great man, who was portrayed by a very short actor in an especially grotesque mask, suspended above the centre area in a cage made of tree roots. Socrates puzzled Leela; he was renowned as a wise man, and yet everything he said seemed to make little sense. She was reminded of the Doctor. Socrates spoke in riddles, and every time he made one of his stupid pronouncements, the audience around her was convulsed with laughter. Even the Doctor, not usually given to overt displays of mirth,

threw back his head and guffawed. Leela was extremely puzzled - in the Sevateem, it was a crime to show disrespect to an elder. It was part of the reason she herself had been exiled from the tribe, for daring to question the words of the shaman.And yet here, among these supposedly brilliant people, it seemed they were being deliberately encouraged to mock the wise man.

She nudged the Doctor. 'Why do they mock Socrates?' she whispered.

`He will surely kill them all for this.'

The Doctor shook his head. 'You're missing my exact point in bringing you here; he said,`These people have devised a social system that's stable enough to withstand satire'

`This is - satire?'

The Doctor hesitated. 'Technically - no. That comes next'

Leela sighed. Ì do not understand:

`Socrates is a wise man, but he has no official power in the city. He is an intellectual' He registered her blank face. Aristophanes is laughing at 'aim, for spending all his time thinking'

Àbout what? Ways to defend the city? Rites to the gods?'

The Doctor chewed his bottom lip. 'I think this is going to be more difficult than I thought: He leaned closer to her. 'You aren't enjoying this are you?'

Leela shrugged:I do not understand why these people are laughing, no: The Doctor stood up. 'Right, come on.You need more of a look around Athens before you, er, get it'

`Get what?' Leela asked as they shuffled along the aisle, the play continuing behind them, forgotten.

Despite her bafflement, Leela began to relax as she followed the Doctor 28

from the theatre and walked with him a fairly short distance to the centre of the town.A large courtyard was ringed by a scattering of white-pillared buildings, similar in design but much smaller than the ones on the hilltop.

People of all ages - including, Leela was pleased to see, more women and girls - moved about chattering. There was the relaxed, pleasant atmosphere of the feast day, and as the night grew darker there were good-natured drunken shouts and laughter percolating from all around.

In the centre of the courtyard, which he called the Agora, the Doctor took a crumpled piece of paper, which looked as if he had torn it out of a book, from his pocket and examined it under the light thrown from a nearby torch. He cast about with one of his long bony fingers. Now, the gaffe we're looking for should be -' he jabbed in a particular direction between two alleyways - down there. Past the Painted Stoa and left at Simon the Shoemaker's'

As they walked on, Leela asked, 'Doctor, have you ever been here before?'

Ì always meant to,' he replied. 'But all kinds of things - generally green, hairy things - kept getting in the way.'

`What happens to these clever people? Do they conquer and rule the earth?' asked Leela.

Ah

' The Doctor coughed. 'No, first the Spartans, then the Romans - I told you about them - conquer Athens.This place becomes a fairly minor satellite of the Roman Empire'

Ànd you say they are clever!' exclaimed Leela.

The Doctor paused outside a particular house, after first consulting his map once again, and fixed her with a look she could not understand. 'The principles of government developed here influenced the rest of human history. Enabled humans to co-operate and co-exist, eventually to advance into space'

Leela was now more puzzled than ever. 'But they were conquered,' she protested.

Tut not destroyed. The worth of their culture was recognised, and incorporated into political systems thousands of years later.'

`You do not take lessons from the vanquished, Doctor,' said Leela with an air of superiority.

The Doctor moved very close to her, unusually for him, and whispered,

`Do you know something?'

`What?'

`Sometimes you can be very depressing'

Leela blinked. 'Oh' She didn't quite know how she felt about that.

Everything she had reasoned - and the Doctor was always exhorting her to reason - seemed to make sense to her.

The Doctor turned to the wooden door of the very large house behind 29

them, and rapped very hard on the door. 'We're going to a party,' he said, suddenly smiling again.

`But we have not been invited,' said Leela.

`They won't mind gatecrashers,' said the Doctor, with the confidence Leela had learnt to distrust. She felt instinctively for the knife she had concealed beneath her robe.

The door swung open, revealing a bemused-looking man in his fifties with a lined, distinguished face. Before he had a chance to speak, the Doctor threw off his hat, scarf and coat and bundled them into the man's hands. 'Hello,' said the Doctor cheerily. 'Sorry we're late, shocking traffic round the Pnyx. What you need is a good one-way system.' He pointed forwards. 'This way is it?'

Leela followed him past the attendant. 'Is that the owner of the house?'

`No, that was a slave,' he said.

Leela blinked She did not know the word. 'Slave?'

The Doctor stopped before another wooden door, further left down the hall. He pressed his ear to the door. Ah, this sounds like it'

Without the formality of knocking this time, the Doctor swung the door open and barged in. It took Leela a short while to take in the scene that greeted them. The room was medium-sized, with a beautifully decorated tiled floor picked out in white and blue

geometric designs. Around the walls were lined about six or seven wooden frames, like beds, with striped cushions and coverings on top of them. Reclining on these couches, sampling food and drink set out in bowls on low wooden tables before them, were six men of different ages, wearing only the lower halves of the Athenian garment. They were talking and laughing together. There were other attendants, or slaves as the Doctor had called them, bringing through more jugs of wine and fresh dishes from a preparation room.

One of the men, tall, handsome and fairly young, looked up at the newcomers and clapped his hands together. Àh!' he cried. 'The entertainers. Bring the girl forward'

There was a general murmur of interest from the other men, and Leela felt herself the centre of their scrutiny. 'I am not an entertainer,' she said fiercely.

The men looked puzzled and the Doctor deftly intervened. 'No, I'm afraid we're just simple travellers here for the feast day. One of the priests pointed us this way, said you were having a good knees up' When they looked puzzled he cleared his throat and added, 'And he said that you, Anaximander, were renowned for your Homeric levels of hospitality.'

The Doctor had obviously said the right thing.The young man stood up and clapped him heartily on the shoulder. 'It is an honour to receive you'

He clapped his hands and addressed the slaves. 'More food and wine for our guests.' The slaves hurried out without looking up.

Leela sat down with the Doctor next to the host, Anaximander. 'First, may I know who has come, so very welcome, to my house?'

`Well,' said the Doctor. 'I'm the Doctor. And this is my wife, she's called Leela:

`Wife?' Leela spluttered.

The men giggled at her indignation.

The Doctor said in a loud stage whisper, 'Don't mind her, she's from Sparta, you know.'

Whatever this meant, it caused raised eyebrows and amused interest from the guests. One of them, a serious-looking man in his fifties, leaned forward. 'You have picked a woman from Sparta?'

The Doctor shrugged. 'She picked me, really.'

The man leant forward, examining Leela with interest. 'Is it true, the girls of Sparta are trained as warriors?' He poked her gently with a finger and she instinctively frowned.

`Touch me again and I will break your neck,' she said coldly. To her astonishment and rage the men simply laughed at her.

Ìt's true then!' said Anaximander.

Ì dread to think what her mother must be like,' joked another of the Athenians, a thin-faced fellow with a relaxed, sardonic air about him.

Ìntroductions, I think,' the Doctor prompted.

Anaximander nodded. 'Of course. Pardon my rudeness. That's Aristophanes,' he said, pointing to the joker.

The Doctor smiled. `Hello.We just came from your show.'

Aristophanes smiled politely, as if he were used to hearing people say that. 'Really. I do hope you enjoyed it.

`We loved it, didn't we, Leela?'

Ì understood nothing of your work,' said Leela bluntly.

Ì should hope so too,' said Aristophanes. 'The day Spartans start getting my stuff is the day I'll hang up my stylus'

Anaximander moved on to introduce the serious-looking man who had prodded Leela. 'And here is the winner of today's prize, with his tragedy of *Philoctetes*

Euripides'

-

The Doctor shook his hand warmly. 'Euripides trousers, you pay for dese trousers...' he said to himself.

`Pardon?' said Euripides.

`Nothing,' said the Doctor.

Ànd over here,' said Anaximander, coming to the last two men, 'we've got Plato, and of course Socrates.'

The Doctor shook hands warmly with Plato, who was thin and slightly edgy with a large nose and broad shoulders. Leela looked at the other -

Socrates the wise man. He was very short, and extraordinarily ugly, with a squashed nose and piggy eyes. She was amused to realise that the 31

grotesqueries of the mask in the play had not been very exaggerated at all. Unlike the others, his feet were bare, and they were filthy. His hair was matted to his head, and even from this distance she could smell his bad breath.

Ì don't understand,' she said. 'You are the wise man of the tribe, and you sit and eat with the one who mocks you'

Socrates shrugged. 'Why should it worry me? It is not important'

Ìn my tribe, those who mock the wise men are cast out'

Socrates leant forward, interested. 'And what does that achieve?'

Before Leela could answer, there was a curious chirruping sound.

Anaximander looked round, startled. 'What a strange cry. I have never heard a bird sing like that before'

Euripides looked worried. 'A new bird has come to Athens. What can this signify?'

'Oh here we go,' sighed.Àristophanes.`Doubtless it is a messenger ofAres or something, warning of unavoidable doom and disaster for all Athens'

Suddenly the noise cut off. Only Leela saw the Doctor's hand slipping out of his waistcoat pocket at the very same moment.

Socrates stood up. 'I am sorry,' he said, with an odd flatness to his speech. 'I have to go'

Plato frowned. 'Why? The party's barely started, and these two look like they could tell us a thing or two'

Ì have to go,' Socrates repeated. He slipped between the Doctor and Leela and hurried out of the house.

Anaximander indicated the Doctor and Leela to sit down on the seat vacated by Socrates. 'Take a seat. I'm dreadfully sorry about Socrates, he never usually misses the chance for a drink'

Ì bet I know what it is,' said Aristophanes dryly. 'Some wonderful new thought has occurred to him, and he's gone off to lie in the dirt and contemplate it.'

'Or perhaps it was the bird,' said Euripides. 'The strange call unsettled him'

It's unsettled me,' the Doctor whispered to Leela under cover of the men's conversation.

`Do not be afraid, Doctor. I will protect you'

The Doctor stared at her. 'Afraid? I'm not afraid. I'm just peeved. Just my luck. Here we are, sat between some of the greatest geniuses your planet has ever known, and my sub-plasmic beam tracer goes off.' He slipped his hand into his pocket again surreptitiously. He bent his head close to hers.

`You stay here, and try to learn something from these people'

`No - ' Leela protested, but the Doctor was already on his feet.

He coughed and spoke to Anaximander. 'Excuse me, could you possibly direct me to your, er, gents?'

Anaximander was puzzled. 'The boys are coming a bit later. One of them's a real pastry, Corinthian flautist -'

`No, no, you misunderstand,' said the Doctor hurriedly:I mean the toilet.

Lavatory? Er, latrine?'

Anaximander's face cleared. 'Oh, right you are' He pointed to the door.

Ìt's second on the right'

`Thank you,' said the Doctor. 'Back in a bit' With a meaningful glance

at Leela, he hurried out.

Leela was angry and frustrated. In the Doctor's absence, the men immediately began a conversation on the subject of love. She could hardly follow a word of it. To her, these men didn't look like geniuses. They seemed idle and decadent, and their words were often unclean and confusing.After about five minutes she made a decision and stood up.

Ì too must use the gents,' she said. None of the men seemed to know quite what to say to that, so she quickly strode out.The Doctor's scarf and coat were missing from the peg where the slave had hung them. Leela nodded, and made her way from the house into the night.

Leela guessed that the Doctor was following Socrates the Wise. Her hunting instinct, which the Doctor derided as savage, seemed far more practical a talent than anything you could learn from men like those she had left behind. Secretly, she suspected the Doctor had merely used her

`history lesson' as an excuse to enjoy himself by going to the show and talking about silly things.

She slipped down a side street.There were other parties taking place all over the city, and several times she had to refuse invitations from passing citizens. People often stared at her, and Leela reasoned that they were surprised to see a woman walking by herself at night. In her travels with the Doctor she had been alarmed to discover that in many places girls and women acted like tiny children, and were treated as such.

She knew she was on the right trail when she caught sight of one end of the Doctor's scarf just disappearing round a corner.They were nearing the edge of the city now, coming up to the great wall that surrounded it.

She kept a reasonable distance, not wanting to give herself away until the last possible moment. But it was not to be. As she turned the corner, she walked right into the Doctor.

He hissed a furious `Ssh!' at her and dragged her to the ground. Leela looked up, and saw that a few hundred yards ahead of them across uneven ground, stood facing the city wall, was Socrates. He was apparently inert, and had a dreamy look on his face, almost as though he was asleep.

The Doctor opened his mouth to speak. Leela cut him off. 'I thought I told you to stay where you were,' they both said.

The Doctor shook his head. 'I'm fighting a losing battle with you'

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ed to Socrates. 'What is wrong with him, Doctor?' she asked.

Ìs it something to do with the cry of the strange bird?' She gasped.

`Perhaps it is the call of an evil one.'

'Rubbish:The Doctor held out a small mechanical device.Ìt was the call of this'

`The sub-plasmic beam tracer?' said Leela keenly.

`Yes:The Doctor blinked and stared at her, clearly rather taken aback.

`Yes:

`What is a sub-plasmic beam anyway?'

`Well,' said the Doctor airily, 'it's a sort of radio frequency.'

`So what?'

`So what?'The Doctor coughed in mock indignation. 'It's no business to be used here on Earth, not for a few thousand years anyway.' When Leela looked blank, he added, `They haven't invented the radio yet'

Ì thought they'd invented everything,' said Leela resentfully.

The Doctor shushed her again as an unearthly green glow began to suffuse the wall immediately in front of the somnolent Socrates.

`What is happening?' asked Leela.

` Molecular rearrangement,' said the Doctor.

Leela, none the wiser for the Doctor's explanation, watched as Socrates walked straight ahead and through the green glow.

`Quickly!' the Doctor shouted. He grabbed Leela's hand and they ran straight into the green glow as it started to fade.

Leela felt the air shimmer and solidify around her. There was a nauseating tugging sensation as if the wall was reforming around her, and then she and the Doctor were through into the open air. Socrates was some distance ahead of them, striding purposefully towards a small hill which was covered with trees.

Leela looked back at the unbroken wall. 'We went right through it!' she exclaimed. 'How can that be?'

It's very easy if you've got a de-atomic transformer,' said the Doctor.

`Have the Athenians invented that?'

`No,' said the Doctor harshly. 'There's some form of alien intelligence here'

Leela instinctively whipped out her knife. 'Aliens! I knew it!'

`No you didn't,' said the Doctor, striding up off the hill after Socrates.

`We shall hunt them down and destroy them!' said Leela. She felt secure again.

`We shall not:The Doc

not.`The

and flashed out and suddenly the knife was

in his hand. 'I told you not to carry this. Knives are for cutting onions, not people. It's a good thing your people never developed scissors, you'd have all been blinded by teatime' He slipped it into his pocket.

`You never let me do anything,' Leela protested.

They tracked Socrates for about a quarter of an hour, slipping into the dense cover of the trees. Leela was careful not to alert their quarry, taking pains to move silently through the ground of the forest. The Doctor crashed through the foliage next to her, taking no pains to remain silent at all.

Finally they emerged in a clearing at the top of the hill.They kept to the shadows as an astonishing sight greeted them.

Socrates was stood before what looked to Leela's eyes like a small

heap of scorched metal objects. Behind him was a larger metal shape, roughly cylindrical, that had been torn in several places. 'A crashed spaceship, Doctor,' she whispered.

`Well done,' he said.

They watched as Socrates bent down and, taking up a selection of strangely shaped implements scattered over the grass at his feet, started to work on the shattered components.

`What is he doing?'

À quick fix by the look of things,' said the Doctor.

Leela struggled to work it out. 'But if this is an alien spaceship, how can Socrates, who knows nothing even of radio, help to repair it?'

`That's what I'd like to know,' said the Doctor. He started to move forward, then turned and started to whisper, 'You stay he-' Then he checked himself.Òh, what's the point? Come on.'

They advanced steadily into the open, Leela feeling defenceless without her knife. She did not trust, and could never understand, the Doctor's policy of simply walking into danger unarmed. What she had noticed was that he always seemed to be able to turn a situation around through the sheer power of his wisdom, and an uncanny amount of luck. But one day, she was certain, the luck would run out.

The Doctor stepped up close to Socrates, but the elderly Athenian showed no reaction at all. The Doctor waved a hand in front of Socrates'

eyes and there was no response.

`The aliens have put a spell on him,' said Leela. Instantly she regretted her words. 'I mean, they have used science to control him'

Èxcellent,' said the Doctor curtly. He peered down at the wreckage spread out before Socrates. 'These are the main components of a fairly primitive hyper-Zison drive. Look, there's even a reverse flange actuator.'

Òh yes,' said Leela, in the hope it would make the Doctor feel better.

`Very fiddly stuff,' the Doctor mused. He picked up a small unit. 'You'd need a qualified engineer to do a job like this, not an old philosopher,

however brilliant.'

Leela, as always, sensed danger the moment before it happened. Using her full strength, she hurled the Doctor and herself across the ground a split second before a shockingly bright green light pulsed through the 35

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sticky summer air, ripping through the very spot where he had stood.

Fortunately, they had landed behind the largest of the metal objects, what the Doctor had called the hyper-Zison drive, which afforded them some cover.

`The alien,' breathed Leela. 'If only you had let me bring the Tesh gun'

`Watch,' said the Doctor. Ì can sort this out entirely amicably.' He took a white handkerchief from his pocket, knotted it around a twig and lifted it up over the edge of the metal plate. 'Hello?' he called. 'We were just passing. Saw you were having a spot of engine trouble'

Leela heard the sound of heavy, alien footsteps coming closer.

Ìt's a shame you're not a member of the Intergalactic Automobile Association,' the Doctor went on. 'They could have come and lifted you away in a trice'

The footsteps were now overlaid with heavy breathing. Leela tensed herself to spring.

Ìf you ask me, you're going about this the wrong way,' said the Doctor.

Suddenly their cover was ripped from them. Leela could not stop herself gasping at the creature that loomed above them. It was vaguely human in shape, but was covered in leathery green skin. The only recognisable features on its huge head were three glowing red eyes.

`You are primitives,' it rasped.

Èr, no we aren't, actually,' said the Doctor, springing up. 'Well, I'm not anyway.'

The creature spoke again. 'What can you know of the... engine?'

The Doctor shrugged and shot the alien one of his dazzling grins.

'Well, I'd say it was a fairly shambolic piece of work to begin with. Why you've let this poor old fellow go mucking about with it I can't imagine'

The creature raised one of its three arms. Clasped in the appendage at the end was an ovoid-shaped weapon.`You are not from this planet'

No, I'm not,' said the Doctor.

The creature lowered its gun directly at the Doctor:Then you must help to repair the drive'

Ì don't think so,' said the Doctor. 'I mean, there's nothing I'd like better than to lend a helping hand, but I'm afraid I know very little about hyper-Zison technology. I didn't know anybody was still using it apart from those awful Jezark people'

The creature hissed. I am Grimmon of the Jezark race!'

Òh,' said the Doctor. 'Oh? Sorry, did I say awful Jezark people, I meant to say lovely Jezark people'

`My ship crashed here,' Grimmon continued. 'At first I thought it would be impossible to leave. I am a pilot, not an engineer. I could not hope to repair the damaged components. I was desperate. But then I discovered this creature' He gestured to Socrates. 'I sent out a sub-plasmic signal'

Àh,' said the Doctor. 'Which of course can only be detected by a highly evolved brain.'

`This human is a mutation,' said Grimmon. 'His mind has evolved too far and too fast, ahead of the others of his species. I summoned him here and connected him to the central computer bank of my ship. I could not risk my own brain in the machine.'

The Doctor gulped. 'You linked the brain of Socrates to a - to a computer? That is appallingly dangerous'

`Why? Slave creatures are often connected, for ease of use.'

`Because this particular slave creature,' said the Doctor, 'is at the centre of a circle of brilliant minds down in that city. He still has a lot to do. He's a vital link in the cultural development of this planet'

Grimmon laughed. 'He is merely a slightly developed primitive'

`What's more,' the Doctor continued, 'if I'm not very much mistaken, one of the many drawbacks with hyper-Zison technology is that you start it up and it blows your landing ground to smithereens.'

`That is unimportant,' said Grimmon

The Doctor was horrified. 'Unimportant? You blow Athens to bits and it will set the culture of this planet back perhaps thousands of years' He looked back at the city:That's an awful lot of dead white European males...'

Grimmon looked puzzled - as far as Leela could tell, anyway. He pointed to the *city,`That* is the most significant city on this planet?'

`Yes,' said Leela, feeling she really ought to say something.

Grimmon bared his teeth - which were in the middle of his chest - and roared with a kind of hiccoughing laughter. 'If you speak the truth, then this planet is truly even less significant than I had imagined!'

`Listen, Grimmon,' said the Doctor seriously. 'You've got to disconnect Socrates from the computer.'

Àndif I don't?' asked Grimmon.

Ìf you don't, well then

'The Doctor trailed off.

`Don't worry, I'll give you plenty of time to get away,' said Grimmon 'The repairs are almost complete.'

The Doctor shrugged, smiled and said, 'Well, that's all right then, you carry on.After all, what's a few thousand years worth of human history?'

Leela was puzzled. This was most unlike the Doctor, to abandon the humans he admired so much for the sake of one alien.

Ì am glad you see sense,' said Grimmon, lowering his weapon.

The moment he did, the Doctor leapt forward. Leela reacted instinctively, kicking the weapon from Grimmon's hand and sending it flying away. At the same time, the Doctor pulled Leela's knife from his pocket and gripped Grimmon from behind. He levelled the knife at the

lower part of Grimmon's head, then, realising his mistake, lowered it to the throat that was actually in the middle of his stomach.

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`Right,' he said unsteadily. I'm afraid I can't let you do this. Leela, get Socrates back to the city.'

Leela obeyed, dragging the confused old philosopher away.

Ì'll join you later,' called the Doctor. 'Just a couple of things to clear up first'

Leela led the dazed Socrates back to the city. This time, they had to enter through one of the main gates, but fortunately Socrates was recognised -

and mocked - by the soldiers guarding it. Leela dragged the old man back towards the TARDIS, assuming that the Doctor would rendezvous with her there.

As they waited, dawn began to rise. Socrates seemed slowly to return to his senses, looking about him with mounting confusion. He stared at his hands. 'What am I doing here?' he muttered.Ànd who are you?'

`We have rescued you from the alien Grimmon,' said Leela.

Socrates nodded, his memory returning. 'Oh yes, the Spartan girl... I was at Anaximander's place ... '

`You are the wisest man in Athens,' said Leela. 'The city needs you'

`That's certainly true!' cried a familiar voice. Leela was delighted to see the Doctor loping towards them, fanning away the heat of the morning with his hat. He came over and clapped Socrates on the shoulder. 'Now, take my advice, scurry off and do some philosophising. And try to steer clear of trouble'

Socrates looked between them, utterly confused, and stumbled away.

The Doctor shook his head sadly. 'Won't listen, of course. He'll end up with the hemlock no matter what we say or do.'

The hemlock? More aliens?'

'No,' said the Doctor scornfully. 'He falls in with the wrong side and gets himself put on trial and executed. For refusing to acknowledge the gods'

He smiled at her. 'A bit like you in that respect' He blinked suddenly. 'My goodness. Perhaps if you'd stayed behind with your lot, you'd have turned into the greatest mind on that planet'

There was suddenly an enormous rush of wind - Leela shielded her eyes as a bright comet-shaped streak zoomed up and away outside the city wall.

`There goes Grimmon; said the Doctor.

Leela was puzzled 'But surely you slew him, Doctor.'

Ì did not.'

`But the knife -'

The Doctor took it out and looked at it. 'I'm confiscating this.And I warn you now, if you try to kill anybody else this week, you'll get no more jelly babies'

`But what did you do?' Leela demanded.

`Simple,' said the Doctor. 'The threat of force was enough. I reprogrammed his drive using matrix formulae, bypassing the Zison effect. He's gone back to his fleet, and Athens can go back to its business.

That's what we in the diplomacy business call a win-win situation.' He turned to the TARDIS door.

`We are leaving?'

`Yes,' said the Doctor. 'That's the trouble with a place like this.'

`What is?'

`Well, every other person on the street's a vital historical figure. You can't even crash a party without risking the whole causality of human achievement.And it pongs a bit too'

He put the key in the lock of the TARDIS, and as he moved to enter tripped over his scarf and banged his nose against the door. Leela shrieked with laughter.

`There was nothing funny about that,' he said severely, rubbing his nose.

`Yes there was'

`No there wasn't'

`Better than that rotten play,' grumbled Leela.

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MELPOMENE

The Muse of Tragedy

41

Mordieu

Tara Samms

He doesn't want a Martini. He watches me open the bottle with bright blue *it's-only-ten-thirty* eyes, and he watches me pour and he watches me pick up an olive. 'You don't want a Martini, do you want an olive?' I say, and he nods and smiles and I slide the bowl to him across the table. He looks down at the olives and bites his lip as he decides which one to prick with the cocktail stick.

The sunlight's like a solid square on the table in front of us. I used to love my office. Warm, good daylight, nice view. Now it's too damned bright. My head's hurting all over. I drop in the olive and I stir.

yoùrèJerry says good things about you,' I say once I've had the first sip. 'Says on the up:

John shrugs, still choosing his dream olive. 'They liked me on *Westinghouse Desilu Playhouse,'* he says. He's British or something, got to be with that accent. 'And the *U.S. Steel Hour,* I wrote a couple for them.

And I was staff on *Alfred Hitchcock Presents,* for a time. It's such a shame everything's taped now, don't you think? Doing it live, you got a real sense of occasion. If you missed it, that was it. Last chance.' He

sighs. 'Like life.

Special. Now tape makes everything so disposable. But I suppose that's economics for you.'

He speaks fast; I'm still lingering on Desilu, a smile just as slow and warm as the rest of me spreading like sunshine over my face. 'That Desi.

Gotta love the guy. Hey, d'you ever work for *Bugosi Playhouse?'*

John shakes his head.

'Top of the tree there was this guy, Arnie. Real schmuck. He'd waddle past, catch me in the script meeting through the window, come in and chum me up:"Bill, I loved that story, your *Playboy* story.The one with that guy who can change people's thoughts by winking at 'em." *Sight Semaphore* - you ever read that, John?'

John shakes his head again, spears an olive real quick, like it might've tried to move.

Ànyway, he says, "I loved that story. We should do it. But less dark. We should do it with a *twist.You* got to have a twist. How about we make the guy with the wink a *woman,* huh? And she's using thought control to get the guy of her dreams to marry her!" And he's looking at me like he's pulled off some real coup, *voomp,* right in front of us all, this great creative force... Ha! Right!'

John chews his soggy green bullet. 'Would it not have worked with a woman, Bill?'

Àre you kidding me? How could you not have read that one! What, you don't want this job?'

Ì do. I'm interested; he says.And he sits up straighter in his chair, like a pupil being picked on by teacher.

`You know the fee's 50-50, right? I get us the ball, you run with it' He nods solemnly, and now I take in the crazy velvet coat and the vest and cravat and all that. 'You think you're Oscar Wilde, huh?'

John sighs. *never saw a man who looked/With such a wistful eye/Upon that little tent of blue/Which prisoners call the sky.'*

`Huh?'

`Wilde's *Ballad of Reading Gaol,'* he says, helping himself to another olive. 'A hymn for the grounded'

`Well, I could use an Oscar Wilde right now for this *Outer Regions* script. The only one thing worse than being talked about is not being talked about, right? I need more talking about, and fast. So I hope Jerry's right about you, my friend.'

Ì'll try not to disappoint you'

I check my watch. 'I can't give you long. I'm due...' Where the hell am I due? I take another sip. Feel it ease through me.Ìm due somewhere. Ray, that's it' I think it's Ray, anyway. Got it written down somewhere. 'Script conference for *Suspense Theater,* they want me as their hotshot regular.

Then I got to see Ned about that damn idea for the elevator story.

Elevators for Christ's sake. Going down, down, down...'

John nods politely. 'I appreciate your seeing me. Jerry said you were very busy. Even on a Sunday.'

Èspecially on a Sunday. What, I should stay home and bother God?' I snort. 'He don't waste his time bothering me. Suits us both pretty well'

He's looking across the room to that big Bible putting the squeeze on the lectern. 'I just thought...'

`That? That's a funny book, my friend, and strictly for laughs.You know, I' m willing to bet there was an ounce of truth in all those words at one time.You got a bunch of good writers, all working together, pulling in the same direction -'

`Towards the heavens,' he says, this vague smile on his face.

`But then... something goes wrong' I take another gulp. Ìt's a mess. Full of contradictions. Too many rewrites, see. Too many script conferences.

And I'll bet the sponsors got right in there too - Church and its holy Joes took this out and that out and watered it down and put other stuff in...'

He's looking at me uncertainly. 'Hey, we've all been there, right?'

`You're a lot more experienced than I am,' says John carefully.This is tact or flattery, I guess; I'm too steamed to tell. Jeez, I'm sat talking to Oscar Wilde about the Bible, and I feel warm and fine. Even the headache's fading a little.And people wonder why I've started drinking early.

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`Hey' I'm thinking. It's kind of hard and hazy after the fourth martini, but

,' I'm thinking. 'You ever hear of *The Picture of Dorian Grey,* John? We could maybe do that:

`With a twist?'

I stir the martini. 'With a twist.'

John nods solemnly. Knowingly.

I chase half an idea round my head. It never makes it out of the fuggy dark in there. 'OK. What have you got for me, John? We don't have long.

Ned - no, Ray's waiting:

He pops another olive in his mouth. This man - he acquires this portrait of himself and he keeps it in the attic' He's looking straight at me, speaking slow now, kind of unnerving. And he lives his life at five times the speed of everyone else:

I take another sip, roll the juice around in my mouth like I'm tasting his I idea. 'That's the twist? You mean, like, time's accelerated around him?'

'No; I was speaking figuratively.'

'I like the time thing. OK, go on.'

`He does too much. Pushes himself too hard: There's a twinkle in John's eyes now 'I mean, while others bite at life he's out to prove he can eat it whole. But he's got this secret...'

ÒK' Three sips and I swear the glass is empty. It's crazy. `So what happens to the guy? And the portrait?'

`His portrait stays just the same - there's nothing magical about it. It's

just a picture, of a young and healthy man He keeps it in the attic, out of the way, unseen. He doesn't want to be reminded of it, because the man himself is ageing very quickly. He's becoming haggard, ugly, exhausted. He doesn't know why.'

'We don't have long, here, John ,Ì look him straight in the bright blues.

'What's our resolution? What's the goddamned twist?'

Ì'm only ghosting for you,' says John, leaning back so far into the sunlight I can't look at him any more. Ì was hoping you could tell me: And as I drive through the city I think of them, shut away in dusty basements or cheap rented rooms or perched on barstools. Writing.

Writing my words.

This is a tough business. You make a big, bright name for yourself, you got to keep it bright. You got to keep working. You stop working, the world thinks you died in your sleep and they'll just go to the guy queuing up behind you. So, me, I got nine projects on the go right now. Four TV

scripts, two movie scripts optioned, two short stories for our biggest gentlemen's magazines and the novel. Nine projects, and the producers, the editors, they pretty much all think they've got my exclusive attention.

I can't do it all. No one can do it all. But I'm not turning anything down.

Look at me, I'm chasing it up, I'm going after it. I'm thirty-three years old, my life's halfway through, there's no time in life to do the things I need to.You can't just sit still and expect the next big thing to land in your lap.

Look at Phil. *Designs* was great, *Designs* got the Emmy, the press talking, the movie deal. What next? Sure, he sold a ton of stuff on the back of it, but it took him three years to make another *Designs.*

You got to go out and make it happen. Eight out of the nine may flop, may do nothing. Hell, Cuba may kick off tomorrow and Khrushchev drop the bomb and everything I've done will go up in Bikini smoke.

But if the ninth romps home and the bomb doesn't drop, that one survivor might just be the one the world remembers.That makes sure *I'm* remembered. If you're not remembered... who the hell were you?

I need to be taking it easy, everyone says.And maybe I am going through kind of a foggy patch. That's why **I** got others taking the strain for me.

Jerry's holed up on movie one, I got Chuck on top of the western, McNulty's polishing the stories... All these guys desperate for the work, for the experience. For a way in. All these little fragments of myself. They owe me.There was no one holding open any doors for me ten years ago.

How John's going **to** work out **I** can't tell. But Jerry's a good judge.

You've got to have faith.

So I see Ray over at Crombie's Grill on Cherokee. I'm late but he pretends not to mind He's got fat since I saw him just last year. His head's like a shiny pink bowling **ball, his hands are white and sweaty and poised over a salad.**

`What you got for me, Bill?' says Ray, once I've ordered raw steak and a martini. 'I'm sorry to drag you out here on a Sunday but we need to move fast - and we need the great writers.' A big warm smile punctuates his sentences. 'Our prayers have been answered, praise the lord. Network's moving *Suspense* to Friday nights.The **board thinks you'd be great for the first show.And from there...' He looks at me warmly, rubs his hook nose.**

I grope for the good idea I had in my head. Why's my damned head hurting so much these days? There's something I think I should remember, but it's gone. **I** take another drink. The olive's black, a dark, **shiny eye looking up at me from the glass.**

`There's this guy.' *Come on, think him through, pull him out. 'Scientist* maybe.And something happens to him - some experiment goes wrong.

Ray doesn't look up from his salad. Uh-huh :

Ànd wham! The guy finds he's living his life five times faster than everyone else.'

Ray pops a cherry tomato into his mouth and bites down on it.

I loosen my collar.

`Suddenly he can't interact with anyone. He's moving too fast for them, 46

you get it? And... See, he was a genius too' It's getting hard to breathe in here.Ànd this just makes him believe he's a genius even more. 'Cause the world seems real slow to him'

Ray mops at his fat mouth with the napkin.

I' m as short of breath as I am on ideas. 'See... this guy's moving faster than anyone - '

Ànd there's a twist - '

An indulgent laugh. It's a terrible idea, Bill'

`You just don't get it yet - '

`Come on, what else have you got?'

got...'

I got nothing, is the truth. I spend five minutes quietly mapping out this nothing, feeling its size and weight.

And I guess Ray feels it too 'cause he makes some small talk and he asks about Cindy and when the baby's due and says it sure is great to see me but maybe I should rest up a little, I'm looking kind of beat, and that he has to get back now and sort out script one or the network's gonna crucify him and we'll meet again soon and talk some more and God bless me, he'll call.

The waiter brings me my steak and another drink, and he brings Ray the check.

In this world there are only two tragedies, Wilde says. One is not getting what one wants, and the other is getting it.

Poor Bill.

Whereas my tragedy smiles down on me each time I look up at the night sky. It feels wrong that I can only walk these lonely miles far beneath it. I remember nothing of my past before I came to be here but I have pieced things together. And I know I should be able to fly, and wonder how long will my self-made prison stand.

Killing time is perhaps the essence of comedy, someone once told me, just as the essence of tragedy is killing eternity. That's a quote, I think.

I write and I write to tease out the dreams but when I feel close I break off. I feel akin to the three blind men and the elephant, who feel around the parts of that dear animal but miss the whole. And the advertisers, too, and the producers, they take the fragments I give them and make the wrong things out of them until whatever vision I had is

' shattered. Television cannot unleash my frantic imaginings. They give me men in suits instead of monsters. They give me wooden sets and actors and cheap effects for cheap thrills.

But I know there is more than this. I know how deep this dark skein of my imagination goes. It is too deep for a human life. It goes deeper 47

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than the light from those pinprick stars into the black night, and it frightens me.

Knowing it all, or knowing nothing.

I don't know which would be worse.

And the long, indecisive day passes as always it must. And the starry sky offers no clues. I trace the patterns of the stars, their intricate constellations in the form of creatures no eye on Earth has ever seen.

And the dim glimmer of those alien points is like my understanding.

I go see Susie over on Fairfax. I got these pains in my chest. I want to go massage someone else's. Cindy's too sore, with the kid so close. And Susie's nineteen and I am the devil maybe but my head's throbbing and I never could hear a conscience in there anyplace.

It never used to be like this.That's the only thing I'm damn well sure of.

But, seems it's the thing that matters least.

Something's wrong when I pull up on the kerbside. I can feel it. As wrong as my sports car looks parked in this crummy street. I feel eyes on me though there's no one around.

Elevator's out (damn those elevators) and so I trudge up the stairs, resting on every fifth step. I can't breathe right, and my chest is

cramping right up.

I get to the door, and give it a vice squad knock. Ìt's Bill,' I holler, heavy and breathless. Òpen up.'

And she does. Awkwardly. The doorknob twists but won't catch, first few times. I think maybe she's been drinking too.

There's her leading lady face, black-bobbed and sharp, but powder white. And then I see her hands are covered in fresh blood. It's a shock and I stare at this thick and crimson-black juice flooding over her wrists, soaking through her flimsy white top. It's kind of transfixing and suddenly all I can think about is the steak I downed at Crombie's. Susie's just staring at her hands, wide-eyed at all this blood starting to pool on the floor, kind of in wonder.

`Jesus, Susie,' I hiss at her, 'what did you do?'

`Nothing,' she whispers, and she almost sounds ashamed of herself. 'I was watching the game. I was eating pretzels, and it just started. My palms started bleeding. *Bleeding:*

`You're telling me you didn't do this?'

Ì didn't do this.'

Òkay, so, what - I'm meant to think this is stigmata?'

`Huh?'

`The wounds of Christ? You're telling me that Christ has picked on a first-year med student to feel His pain?' I stared at her, baffled. 'Get real, Susie.You're many things, but a walking miracle?'

`The wounds of Christ.'And she giggles like this is some big blessing and then she looks at me kind of woozy and says, 'Oh God, I think I'm gonna puke.'

And she topples backwards like she's fainting and I'm thinking, *Sweet Jesus, this ain't what I came round for today*

Her hands are punctured, like she ran them through on a skewer. We bind up her palms and I take her to hospital. Well, I call her a cab and I follow on behind. No way is she bleeding on my seats. How do I explain that away?

I can hear people shouting and wailing past the crossroads like they're crazy. Well, they ought to take a look at Susie.

Stigmata, I' m thinking. *Gee, I wonder how far the sponsors would jump if I turned in a script on that.* And when I meet her in the parking lot outside the hospital Susie's muttering under her breath some stuff I can't hear. It's kind of strange 'cause I know she doesn't use, she's clean, and yet she won't change this crazy story.

Anyways, inside the hospital we find there's quite a queue.

It's a queue dripping blood.

1 Must be thirty people there, all howling and wailing and crying.They've got cops in to try to keep some order with these people. Most of the queue's holding out bloody hands for someone to help them. Some are waving their wounds in the faces of the passers-by, maybe hoping people will think they're special.

But I guess most of them are just plain scared. Their hands squelch messily as they pray.

I'm still not breathing good.

I wait with Susie for the better part of an hour. Most everyone in the queue's the same, not hurting, just losing blood. But two or three, they make a real showtune out of it. 'We're feeling Christ's agonies,' they shout.

They'll feel their own too if they don't shut up, I'm thinking Finally we get called through - and the bleeding stops.

Just like that.

A nurse is swabbing at Susie's palms, and the blood drizzles away into a sink, turns to thin red water. Suddenly there's no gashes in Susie's hands, no hole, just these tiny marks left behind, like ash.

`Just like the others,' says the nurse, not batting an eyelid. 'There's nothing more I can do. Maybe you should see a priest.' Is it a gag or is it advice? I don't know, but she leaves us alone. It seems it's the same story outside in the sticky, slippery waiting room. Christ's gone coy on his ecstatics. He's not showing his blood any more.

`Nothing there,' I say, holding her hands right up to my face. And I put

on a big smile like the fear and the mystery's drained right away with the blood.

`Nothing?' she says suddenly on the drive back home, like she's only just heard a half-hour later. She looks at me. 'I still got *you* in the palm of my hand, don't I?'

I don't get back till gone nine.

I'm trying to find an explanation for what's happened. I can't.This is real *Outer Regions* stuff. I write this kind of crap, I'm not meant to live it.

I don't talk to Cindy much. She's tired. My head hurts. It's like that between us these days. She's so far gone now she fills the whole room by herself. Her and the baby, crowding me out. I sit in the office where it's cool and dark now Seems I can breathe easier here. And I look at my picture on the jacket of the new short-story collection that's just come in for my approval. I look old. I score a line through myself. We'll *use* the last one.

I think of all that blood on Susie's hands, and I walk over to my big black Bible and I feel hot in the face as I rustle through the pages, remembering stuff. How many times did Mom make me read this? I collected the contradictions in secret, learned them all on those long hot days when I'd been bad and she locked me up.

Cindy pokes her upturned nose into the office. Her greasy hair's scraped back and her face looks gaunt and reddened. Pregnancy doesn't suit my wife. It's like the baby's eating her from the inside. I remember she used to be so pretty. I'm sure she was.

`Can I get you a coffee, Bill?'

I feel her hooded eyes on me as I rustle through the wide translucent pages. 'Hang on, CM:

`They just had the weirdest thing on the TV news. Sixty people got these crazy wounds in their hands, or their feet. Foreheads, some of them.'

It's baloney. You know what? None of the accounts of Jesus's crucifixion were written by anyone who was actually there,' I tell her.

`John says he got his info from a reliable eye-witness. Reliable! John

says Jesus carried his cross to the killing ground, but Mark says Simon of Cyrene did it for him.'

`But do you want a coffee, Bill?'

I leaf through to Acts; words, sentences, whole passages unlocking themselves to me, like dark memories suddenly glittering in sunlight.

`Listen, Cindy. Will you just listen? Acts states again and again that Jesus was killed and hanged in a tree. Acts 5:30. Acts 10:39... Acts 13:29. Even Peter says something similar. But guess what - here's the killer - Galatians 3:13 states, "Cursed is everyone that hangeth on a tree." Can you believe that? Huh?'

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I stand smiling at her, a clever, rational man picking holes in two thousand-year-old words.

Ì'll get you a coffee,' says Cindy.

And the sunlight's fading again.

Look,' they were telling me. `Look. See our wounds.'

***I** was crossing the street with a big brown paper bag of groceries. I stared and saw the rent flesh, and all that blood, but more than that I saw the eyes of all my neighbours, these ordinary, normal people who barely look up from day to day. They were together (Except for the one who was driven off in a cab, alone. Maybe Bill worries about the wrong kind of being talked about.) They were out in the street, and some were jubilant, and some were crying, and some were clinging on to one another.*

But it was as if something had woken them. It takes the spilling of blood to start a cause sometimes, but it was like these people had rediscovered something in themselves, something complex and fast-

; flowing and vital. They had the proof of it, pooling at their feet on those same dusty sidewalks they tramped each day.

The cries and the tears and the laughter and pride lasted far longer than the bleeding. The people were rich with it.

The press came and rapped smartly on doors. Preachers came, or were born on the spot, and spouted the meanings they imagined. The victims of this strange blight could pick and choose who they answered the door to.

Like a crush, the press had suddenly developed an all-eclipsing interest in these downtrodden little people. And you could see the wonder, the dare-I-believe-this *in the people's eyes.*

Maybe that was the miracle.

Around midnight I come to the small, rundown church that squats humbly on the corner of my block. Its the only one in the neighbourhood with no lights on inside.

Outside there's ,a statue of the Virgin Mary, half hidden in ivy. The paint has peeled away from her clothes. Vandals have knocked off one arm and daubed obsenities over her.

Two trickles of blood are seeping from her eyes.

There's a package from John next morning. Some ideas, and a request for **a** meet to discuss them. Weird ideas. He's got a story about this giant drilling project; the drill head cracks through the Earth's crust and releases this gas that turns people crazy. That drill head sums it up - a giant bore. He's got another one about the end of the world kicking off in San Francisco. It's too big. I don't see it working.

There's nothing there on the Dorian Grey idea.

That was all bullshit anyway.

51

`Bill?' Cindy finds me in my study as normal. She's cradling her big belly.

`Why don't we do something this weekend?'

`Sure, honey. But you sure you shouldn't stay home?'

Ì'm not sick, Bill; she tries persuading me. 'We could maybe go see a movie?'

We were always so big on the movies.

Ì don't go to the movies no more; I tell her. And I go back to my post and wonder where I should file stuff. And I know Cindy's still standing there in the doorway behind me. She hasn't moved. She just can't think of anything more to say, and she doesn't like that. So she stays thinking and standing.

And I wonder if she's feeling me slipping through her hot clammy fingers, or just the drum-tight swell of her belly as always.

`You're quiet today, John'

We're sat in Musso and Franks, a pile of papers spread over the table.

I've drawn a blank on fresh ideas again but I'm telling John what I don't like about his stories. He's taking, it well.

'I wish you could see what was in my head; he says.'So vivid, so clear...

but only in snatches. I can't match up the events with the overall story.'

He's playing with his cutlery, rubbing the silver stem of a soup spoon.

'Some people thought that writing would be good therapy for me.

"Writing is nothing but a guided dream"...' And he sighs, like someone's letting the air out of him:These fragments of memories have shared my head for so many years.You couldn't imagine'

Ìt's an artist's *job* to imagine' I'm only half listening. Keep feeling kind of distracted. Concentration all shot to hell. 'Hey, wait. How about this: a child is born with all the memories it'll ever have as an adult. Only, as this child gets older and these things start to happen, he forgets them. As a man he's aware of everything he'll do up to the point it happens, then it starts to fade, the memories decay...'

John considers this. 'He's sort of haunted by his own future?'

`But his past and present means nothing to him, he forgets what's brought him to each new situation...'

`Helpless in fate's clutches' John says it like he can relate.Then he looks at me kind of strangely. 'How could that happen?'

A waiter comes, brings us French onion soup with crackers. A thick crust of cheese, bloated with fat, gloats over the bowl.

`You're right, it's a lousy idea. It won't work' I tap the spoon against the rubber cheese. Forget it:

I have a half-hour before I have to get off to see Ned.Then I'm going to check up on Susie, see how she is. God willing - or Christ willing,

maybe

- it won't be just the elevators going down down down this afternoon.

52

A couple of glance-around, silent minutes flirt with the pair of us. 'You seem kind of quiet, John' Did I say that already?

John shrugs, keeps on studying his menu. 'I was thinking about that epidemic of stigmata yesterday, and if there'll be any more.'

Èpidemic?' I smirk. Come on.'

`That's what they're calling it.' He pulls out the *LA Times* . The headline's so big I'm surprised I couldn't hear it screaming from his briefcase.`Sixty-seven people in one area suddenly sporting wounds in their hands and feet at the same time? What would you call it if not an epidemic?'

I snort,`Crazy is what I would call it'

It sounds weird, but the blood thing, the whole mass-stigmata episode, it seems to matter less to me today. Already it seems like a kind of weird dream; I couldn't explain what had happened, so most likely my mind has just rejected it - some hoax that Susie was in on and I wasn't. I guess I've always felt that way about religion - being on the outside looking in.The three martinis helped too, I guess. But my stomach's bad now, all cramps.

Pins and needles in my arms and legs too.

Ignore it. I spoon some steaming soup into my mouth. It's rich and salty.

This is the kind of stuff Cindy will feed the kid when it's sick.

`The newspaper says it was some kind of mass delusion: John says. 'But I saw some of those people. I saw the wounds. For a little over an hour they *did* bleed'

`The whole thing's a pile of crap. Stigmata, I mean.There have been no recorded cases prior to...' Groping around again, a white hand in the dark fuzz of memory 'Prior to...'

The thirteenth century' John says smoothly, pulling a small pocket Bible from his coat pocket, flicking through it discreetly. 'It was

around then that the image of the crucified Jesus became a standard icon of Christianity in the West'

`That's just my point."That damned tightness in my chest again. I can't swallow. I pour the soup back in the bowl,`So, what, for 1300 years Christ keeps his pain to himself?'

Ìnteresting, isn't it?' says John, having no such problems with his own soup. He slurps it down noisily. 'Only John makes any mention of nail

; wounds in the hands.And nowhere in the whole Bible does it say Christ was nailed through the feet - and nor should it' He stares at me sadly. 'The

:painters and the sculptors, for all these hundreds of years... their depictions were wrong. No one made to suffer that terrible fate was ever nailed through the hands.Any such fixing would tear right through under the victim's own weight. The Romans nailed their victims through the median nerve in the wrist. Their victim's fists would clench if they'd hit the nerve. If not they'd do it again' He taps his spoon on the tabletop, three times, like he's driving in one hell of a nail.

`So the stigmata bunch are bleeding in the wrong places?' I crow. 'Oh, that's rich.That's wonderful.They took it from art, not from life? God bless the ignorant masses.That's like believing what you see on TV:

`Sometimes, seeing *is* believing; says John gravely. 'These people bled.

That much is undeniable. I saw the wounds.

I almost forgot I saw it too. How can that be?

Some big, elderly woman in mink leans back and scowls at John. `Do you mind, I'm trying to eat; she complains.

John says how sorry he is, and seems to mean it. But I am thinking up about a hundred put-downs to this lady. My mind is suddenly working again, clear and bright and ecstatic. I could pitch a hundred ideas right now

John waits till the mink lady is back fully ensconced in her roast chicken and gravy before he speaks again, quietly. 'It's strange how

the only people apparently affected were in my neighbourhood'

Òh yeah?'

`Yes. Fairfax Avenue and the streets around it'

I drain the martini, jubilation turning queasy suddenly. 'You live round Fairfax, huh?'

`Yes: he says. 'Not so far from that pretty lady you visit'

And I feel like everyone in the grill's turned round to stare. I keep my voice real quiet. 'You been spying on me, John?'

ÒÍf course not,' says John. 'I saw you helping her into a cab while I was out for a walk.You and she must be very close'

John; I hiss, 'cause I can see mink lady's listening in again. 'Keep it down, huh? I mean... come on.You're a man of the world'

John blinked 'I suspect I might be a man of several'

`You know that this stuff... happens:

'I know that all sorts of stuff happens. And I'm afraid it's happening now.' He folds up the paper,`This story isn't over yet'

Ì've got to go now? I'm full of beans. I've got to strike while the iron's hot, while the ideas are sparking out. 'Got to see Ned: Ah, yes, the elevators,' says John sympathetically, like it's a medical condition I've contracted that rates one below crabs. 'But after that you'll see *her* again, won't you? I'll wait for you at her place: *Going down...* Ùh, John, it's sweet you're so keen, but you've got an *Outer Regions* to draft and - '

'I' m not writing about the sinister, shadowy dark stuff today, Bill,' he says, all determined now Ì'm finding it:

`Look, John -'

`What? Where?'

But I can't keep speaking. My chest's full of cramps, I can't even feel my arms and legs.

`Bill?' John rises uncertainly as I stagger.

It's too late.

Suddenly I'm crashing against the next table. I'm on my back. Mink lady's wearing her chicken platter, and she's shrieking. People start to holler and chatter and laugh.

But John's scooping me up in his arms like I weigh next to nothing. He carries me out over his shoulder.

My head's spinning. I catch sight of John's little black Bible in a big puddle of soup.

/

`*Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord.'*

'Let me out. I gotta see Ned.'

'Ned will understand,' John tells me. 'You have another meeting'

My face feels hot against the cool, cracked leather of the back seat of the cab. There's an invisible weight pressing down on my chest. It might be John's ear, he's pressing it to my ribs.

'Your heart's beating normally. It's not an attack'

I swear an old man's in here with me. I can hear him breathing his last, rattling

breaths.

'Drive,' John tells the cabbie. 'Fairfax Avenue.' He pats my hand. 'You may find it harder to breathe soon. I hope so, in a way - it'll prove a theory I have'

Oh yeah.That old man breathing. It's me.

lose track of time.

We drive for a while.

Then I'm in a street.The sky is kind of pale blue, I notice. Nothing more poetic than that. Just pale and blue.

Ned's going to kill me. He hates being stood up. I gotta get him a

essage.

Raincheck, Ned? I'll call you. I got some blinding ideas, you're gonna eat them up.

I' m manhandled up some dun brickwork. I'm dragged up some echoing

+steps. I can't feel anything except the burn in my ribs.

Ned? Something else, for the record: I'm dying.

Suddenly Susie's looking down at me, all concerned. She's got tea towels rapped round her hands. I watch the red spots bloom there. She's Speaking to me but all I can hear and feel is the slow, burning grate of my breathing. Each breath is like a huge, smoky dog dragging itself out of my lungs, then giving up and sliding back in.

Then it stops.

`Rest, now.' John's looking down at me. He offers me a glass of water.

You know, it's interesting'

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'What is?'

'Your symptoms, and Susie's.They both stopped at the same time.'

'I' m not bleeding: I mutter. 'Am I?'

` Maybe there's a picture of you in the attic: John whispers, 'that's gushing blood in torrents.' He glances up at the stained plaster. 'We'll notice it pooling through the ceiling at any moment'

Susie takes the glass of water between both bandaged hands, shakes her head. 'Upstairs there's an old man with a deaf aid. If he ever had your picture up there he'd have pawned it years back.'

'You seem kind of chipper for someone who's just felt Christ's agonies:

`For less than thirty minutes this time: John points out.

'I' m special,' Susie says, gazing in awe at the gory towels wrapped

round her fists like they're beautiful, intricate, ancient tapestries. 'I've been *chosen'*

'You and sixty-six other little sunbeams round Fairfax'

'Would you describe yourself as a religious person, Susie?' John wonders.

` Maybe now,' she says. Her green eyes glitter. 'I mean, this is proof, isn't it'

`Proof of what?' I stare at her.

'Proof He's coming back.'

`Proof of a delusion. Christ wasn't even nailed through the hands'

'He was,' she argues sulkily, Ì saw a stained glass window one time'

John's actually agreeing with her. 'The portraits and paintings may be inaccurate but we can't deny they've been prevalent in churches and paintings and schoolrooms for many hundreds of years'

`So?'

`Well, suppose Christ was looking to return' John seems deadly serious.

`Would He be a stickler for factual detail? Or would He communicate according to the expectations of His less learned followers?'

'This is crazy.' I struggle up from the couch.

'It's bizarre, certainly,' agrees John. 'But try to keep your mind open, Bill.

It's an artist's job to imagine:

I heard that somewhere before.

The breathing's easier but I feel there's something I've lost. It's like that light I felt, back when I was going through the Bible, back at the Grill, that great, diamond-sharp light in my head, it's been leaking away, even from a closed mind. I feel kind of achy, 'cause there's so much that was standing in the light I want to keep a hold of. But it's no use.

`Do you think people will want to take my picture?' Susie looks

between us both. 'There may be sixty-six others like me but I'll bet I'm prettiest. I could get in the papers'

'Sugar, you didn't even believe in God yesterday? I pat her towelled 56

hand. And I'm living proof you ain't cut out for the devout life. Keep a low profile, huh?'

'You felt no pain with the wounds,' John says to her, a statement rather than a question.

`None. Only a kind of... Well, just a feeling of happiness. I was scared - I I never knew I had that much blood inside me - but I was filled with...' She grins. Her eyes are so bright as she shakes her head. 'I guess it's kind of

, how I always imagined *joy* would feel like.'

Èuphoria,' says John. 'You felt no torture, no agonies... And yet almost every reported case of stigmata involves the victim enduring such feelings.'

I' m part of a miracle,' she pouts, folding her arms - not so easy with the towels on her hands. 'You two are just jealous He hasn't chosen you.This is an incredible thing, a *life-changing* thing. It's a sign'

`What does the sign say to you?' John asks.

She jilts out her chin at me. 'Bring peace and love to humanity or it will be destroyed.'

We let that hang in the air a couple of moments.

`You may be part of a miracle,' says John, tut so's Bill'

`Huh? Don't you go trying to involve me'

`But I must.You see, your symptoms are the most interesting of all' He shakes his head sadly. 'Do you know the cause of death in a victim of crucifixion?'

`Loss of blood,' ventures Susie. 'Or shock?'

I don't say a word.

'No' He gets up, looks down at me. 'The cause of death is suffocation.

After hanging from the arms for a short time, violent cramps are felt in the

,chest. Breathing is made more difficult as a result of pressure on the diaphragm.'

He's talking about me.

`These sensations can only be alleviated by the victim alternating the

'weight of the body from arms to legs. The moment the victim grows too

'tired to continue, he slumps - at which point death from asphyxia is inevitable and rapid'

I stare up at him, my mouth open and wordless, my spine buzzing.

`Seems you're the genuine article, Bill,' says John. 'No bogus stigmata for you. No spectacular wounds to display. Just the suffering, trapped inside you for a time'

`No,' I say, but my voice sounds so quiet I can barely hear it. 'I don't

;believe in that crap. I don't believe in any of that stuff.'

`Nevertheless,' John says mildly, 'this stuff happens'

I don't understand what he means. I can't follow the plot. That's why I

,Don't go to the movies no more. The images cloud up in my head and I 57

lose the links that tug the audience through. I should stop the drinking maybe. I know I should.

`Try to sleep, Bill.Take it easy.'

`Sure, John,` So I switch off. My troubles dwindle to a little white dot.

I stay lying down on Susie's couch. I feel old and kind of dim and dark inside, like someone's walking round, checking the store's empty and flicking off the lights.

I hear Susie talking with John in the next room. Quiet, careful voices.

`Why has this happened to him?'

'Why to any of you? I don't know.'

`But why him, this way? That damned imagination of his. He had to go one better than everyone else, didn't he?'

A pause. Then John says, 'Well, you know, he's suffering inside already.

Maybe this... force or feeling picked up on that somehow. I don't know'

`What's wrong with him? He's looking so old.'

Old? She can't mean me. It's that face on the jacket flap she's talking about.That's not me.

`Forgetting things... Forgetting what he was talking about halfway through a conversation sometimes. He's taking too much on. Drinking too much.'

`The drinking isn't causing this. That's just something he does to help him cope with it,' I hear John say. He sounds like he knows what he's talking about, his voice precise and prodding, like a doctor's. 'Susie, I believe Bill's in the early stages of some degenerative mental disease.

Either Alzheimer's or Pick's, the only way anyone'll know for sure is when he's died from it'

`Died?'

She sounds upset. That's nice.

`There's no treatment, no reversing the process'

`You could be wrong'

`Perhaps. This is purely my own diagnosis. I imagine his wife will send him for tests soon, when it gets so pronounced that he can't function normally any more'

`Shit. How long does he have?'

`Maybe three years. Maybe less. I'm so very sorry.'

There's a suitably apologetic pause.

Àre you going to tell him?'

`No. I don't think there's anything to be gained from that. Nothing can be done.After a while, he won't even know it's happening to him'

`So why tell me?'

`You asked me what was wrong with Bill.'

Normally I like straight-talkers. But these words are so straight and 58

sharp they're cutting me. Cutting me so hard I can't feel the wounds.This mental picture I have of myself, this young man, this all-ahead-of-him boy, is standing beaten and bloodied now. But I look on him and feel nothing.

Like I'm looking at a statue, like this is art, and we all talk about how artists suffer but we none of us really know a damned thing about pain unless it's happening to us. Happening right now

What I feel right now goes so deep it's actually lost to me.

Ì should stop seeing him,' Susie says.

`That's for you to decide'

`He's going to be a father. His wife'll need him now.And... and he'll need her. I'm not... I'm not good at that responsibility stuff. And with me about to be famous and all... it might look bad for both of us'

And with that my marriage is saved, even if I'm beyond it.

John comes back inside. He looks alarmed to see my eyes open. With a single look he knows I've heard every word. If I didn't feel so weak I'd be up and shaking him by the throat.

`Well,' I say, 'ain't it lucky I'm gonna forget everything you just said'

He says nothing.This is all bullshit.What does *he* know, some hack using

' My name, looking for an easy up in the business? *Bullshit.*

I want a drink.

`*This* was your twist?' I say, all glaring and mad.

Not mine,' he says softly, wet-eyed. Ì'm still waiting for mine'

I walk back home. I should do Bill's script outline tonight. See that through at least; don't want to embarrass Jerry when he's been so kind.

Then I'll move on.

I pass the church. Mary's bloodied cheeks stand rosy and unnoticed amid so much dirt and decay.

Its not real blood, I think to myself. They've mixed animal blood with chilled pork fat. They've opened the back of Mary's head and pressed the cold, sticky fat behind her eyes.And as the fat warms in the mild air the

;blood drips free. It falls through her eyes.

For every real miracle there's a billion cheap stunts. But I don't think this one's malicious. I think someone simply doesn't want this circus to end.

And I look at this dark church and I wonder. Maybe there's someone

'inside it. Or something. Some creature of the heavens who fell to earth, alone

and defenceless, and took refuge here. Who looked around that

!dim and grimy church and felt its best chance was to seek protection in the celebration of others.

Yes. And now this creature has architected a real miracle in the neighbourhood, so that it might be feted and kept safe by loyal followers.

It is not like men, though. It is scabrous, sick and small, a little green 59

fellow maybe. Or something arachnid. Or else wholly alien, a thing with no pattern in the stars.

Desperate, it has reached out and touched as many as it can.

But it is spreading itself too thin. It is weak. It didn't do so well the second time, it didn't last so long. The bleeding was a lesser miracle. It must stay in hiding until it is stronger.

Its followers may not love it when they find out its form. They may turn on it. It is a risk.

For a moment I consider forcing the door and going inside to poke about.

No. Why must I look to the dark for my answers? Yesterday there was real

light in my world. Now I think of Bill and 'Why him?, and why any of us, I suppose.

We can't do everything. Sometimes we have to stop and let go.

We can't know *everything. That would be terrible, for all my pain when I look up at the distant sky.*

I wonder if the thing in the church is really there, and if it is, whether its still alive and planning another trick. If its going to reach out again to those it would seek to convert to its worship, to its preservation - or if all its strength is spent. If it will just slip away now, quietly and alone, unnoticed, not even stirring the dust around it.

I think of the eyes of those excited people, standing for the first time with something to show the world. And I think of Bill, singled out for a different show of wounds.

I think of the tears on the statue face.

Everything must be taken seriously, nothing tragically. Who wrote that?

A wise man, a thinker, who never watched the excited light of a miracle fade away.

60

EUTERPE

The Muse of Music

61

An Overture Too Early

Simon Guerrier

`Let me tell you about the piece I'm working on at the moment,' said Isaac as he poured himself another glass of wine.The reporter and her assistant did not look pleased. Isaac knew full well he had kept them here twenty minutes and only answered three of their questions. But he was wallowing in the attention. He had never realised before just how good it felt to be listened to. And this reporter wasn't bad looking either, in the stern, modern way fashionable here. The glossy sections of the newspapers some of the orchestra left around reckoned the West was leading the global struggle for women's rights and recognition. The conceit of it made him laugh. Their carefully

thought-out costumes -

symbolic

of utility as good as any man - just made him think of the dourly dressed matriarchs back home. Whatever the Generals might think, it was those mothers and maiden aunts who really ran the country, who really had the power.

`Please do,' said the reporter, with an edge Isaac chose not to notice.

`Nothing is worse than getting some morsel of a tune inside your head,'

he said. `You don't know what it is, or where it comes from, this fragment.

And you can't shake it.You understand?'

The reporter had the grace to lie and say she did, though her assistant yawned quite explicitly The man had made no secret of his opinion of the concert, either. Not that he'd said anything as such, but his manner suggested he had spent the evening compiling a mental list of all the places he would rather have been. He looked like the worst sort of music-lover - classically educated, knowledgeable to a point and compensating for his intellectual shortcomings with brash affectation. He had behaved the whole time during the interview like a bored, petulant child, staring round the room, or inspecting his fingernails, or pulling faces to himself -

whatever he could do to show off his disdain. Isaac studiously ignored him back.

`The *frustration* of not knowing the tune, of having just a tantalising fragment, motivates my work. I've been consumed by this one piece for nearly twenty years. I don't have a choice. And I can't honestly say whether I've got nearer to what I think I heard, or warped it into something new and unrecognisable.And my own.'

`There's no risk of you being accused of plagiarism, then,' the reporter said, smoothly. 'The Ambassador,' she went on, looking over her notes,

`Nikolai Faro. He believes this work you're doing will prove to be your masterpiece'

Isaac nodded demurely. Tut that's not for me to say, is it?'

`Faro got you over here on the basis of what he saw in the manuscript you gave him, though. And he thinks it's good enough to get you a passport. We've not yet talked about your request for asylum...'

`You *have* done your research:

`Faro claims that it's dangerous for you back home, that your well-being is compromised by links to revolutionary elements. Is that true?'

'As Dr Faro has said himself, a musician should be able to appeal to all kinds of people, whatever their politics.'

'So it's just a hazard of your celebrity back home?'

'I' m not sure "hazard" is the word I'd use, Miss Smith: Tine.And what about "celebrity"?'

`What are you trying to say?'

I've talked to several people from your country over the last few days.

Not one of them had heard of you. Why is that?'

Ìs that what this is?' he scoffed, genuinely surprised. 'I'm not famous enough?'

The reporter's assistant muttered something about not being talented enough, barely concealing the remark as a cough. Isaac, astonished by such open rudeness, allowed Miss Smith to admonish him herself.

`Doctor!' she said. 'You said you'd behave.'

`This has been a wasted journey, Sarah Jane,' he said, no hint of apology.

`You promised me an alien. I didn't realise you were being so parochial_ '

Isaac ignored Sarah's efforts to apologise. He was staring at the man, who now wouldn't meet his eye. Isaac couldn't believe it.

Ì know who you are,' he said. 'You're the Doctor.'

Miss Smith looked between them, trying to work it out.

`How?' she said. Isaac couldn't keep the smile off his face.

`Twenty years ago,' he said. Ì used to travel with him in the TARDIS!

Ì can't *believe* you sometimes!'

'I won't change my mind, Sarah Jane. I can't! That's all there is to the matter?

`He obviously convinced you he is who he said he is, otherwise you wouldn't be like this. Why's it so awful? You two are old friends!'

`He's from my future, Sarah. Don't you see? The travelling companion of a me I haven't become yet. I can't know what's going to happen to me, not in advance. It would do terrible damage to time, to causality. Can't you see that?'

Sarah supposed she could, but wouldn't admit it, not now. She sat in silence as the Doctor got them on to the motorway. He was leaning forward, straining to see through the rain bashing and battering the windscreen. Inwardly Sarah tried to get on top of her anger. Having fought 64

all the way from the doorstep of the concert hall, this was a chance to regroup. To rework her strategy.

`You could still try to help him,' she said later, her tone more reasonable.

`You needn't ask him any questions. You probably owe him that much'

She left a pause, and when he didn't respond she tried something she knew he'd react to. 'He's an exile because of his travels with you'

Òf course,' was all he said, tight-lipped and staring ahead at the road. It wasn't good enough. Isaac had been so relieved to see the Doctor, to recognise him. He said he'd been back on Earth since the 1950s, since leaving the Doctor. A girl had been involved, he said. Presumably it didn't work out. There was no mention of a wife in his file, in any of the interviews.And even before he had said what he was, she'd been sure he 1 was hiding something. That's what her interview had been driving at.

The Doctor had stormed out, though, and started up the car. He would even have left her behind if she hadn't run out after him right then.That was

hen she'd lost her temper.

If she hadn't, if she had been more in control of her wits, Sarah would certainly have noticed the two tall top-hatted men in grey on the far side of the road.They waited out on the street until the Doctor had driven off.

Sarah would have been intrigued by the way they stood, tall and unmoving like street performers working late. She would have responded on instinct - something about them just wasn't right.At the very least she would have watched them over her shoulder as the Doctor drove away.

And so would have seen one of them saunter up into the concert hall she and the Doctor had just left, where Isaac would now be alone. The other grey man stood outside, looking all around. Sarah would have sized him up in a glance: professional, sleek and deadly.

The Doctor joined Brigadier Lethbridge-Stewart for breakfast first thing next morning.They sat at a small table in the Brigadier's office away from his desk.

The day had started off brightly after the previous night's rain, the view out of the window crisp and green. Nowhere did a fried breakfast quite like UNIT HQ. It was definitely one of the perks of the job, and the 1 Brigadier rarely missed the ritual. While he ate, he would usually read the paper or even catch up on a novel.Anything that wasn't work. He'd made an exception this morning to hear all about the Doctor's latest crisis.

`You certainly know how to treat the hired help, don't you, Doctor?' he mocked cheerily, having been brought up to speed. 'What is it you do to them? Just look at these recent adventures Ms Grant - *Mrs Jones,* has had!'

`What?' said the Doctor, entirely thrown. 'Is Jo all right?'

Ìs now, I hear,' the Brigadier said, reaching for more toast. 'Dealt with it on her own. Training she got here, I expect. She'll have it all in the letter 65

she's sending, anyway. I sometimes get my gossip in advance because of the wires her husband's lot send in. Still, the locals think it's your crystal's fault and Jo wants shot of it. Should arrive back here any day now.'

The Doctor had already lost interest, or didn't want to talk about Jo. He was still funny about her, even after all these months. That reporter had been a tonic, of course. Just what he needed to get him out and about again, stop him moping. This latest thing would be all her doing too. He would bet on it.

`This composer chap,' said the Brigadier, getting back on track. 'You must realise how irregular it would be for UNIT to get involved in immigration...'

`The chances are that Isaac is a UK citizen,' said the Doctor, primly. He really had got out of bed on the wrong side. 'Or has been. Or will be'

`You do know his background, then? Ms Smith said - '

`Never mind what she said and no I don't,' he snapped. 'It's his accent that's the obvious giveaway, Brigadier.'

`His accent.'

`He hasn't lost the English pronunciation of some words. A real foreigner, if you'll excuse the term, would have to have been in England, or amongst English-speakers, for years to get that. I'd guess Hampshire, but Home Counties definitely. Just an adequately qualified linguist would spot it a mile off: He grinned, the first time he had smiled all morning. 'You could test him for his innate Englishness:

`Fine,' said the Brigadier:But that might not be enough, and I'm not sure why UNIT should have to carry - '

ÙNIT should "carry" him, the Doctor interrupted, `because, if he will be a companion of mine - and I've no doubt that he will, or was - he's a UNIT operative by proxy. I owe it to the man because he got caught up in my adventures and, unless my future self decides to be a villain like the Master, I'd guarantee that Isaac helped get the Earth out of trouble. On more than one occasion.'

`Fine,' said the Brigadier, holding up his hands. He'd long known how pointless it was to argue with the Doctor. He could get so hot-headed and grand, and was more often than not right. 'I'll come up with

something about wanting him as a special advisor.That's worked before'

The Doctor remembered to say thank you before he left.

At around the same time, Sarah locked her MG and crossed back over the road to the small flat where Isaac was living. He opened the door looking groggy, pale and unshaven in a tatty old dressing gown. She had got him out of bed. When she had seen him the night before, conducting his music, he had seemed ordinary, anonymous.Then he'd been in black tie.

Now he looked even worse. He was in his late fifties, not tall and no longer slim. The hair he had left was greying in a way that just looked untidy. She couldn't picture him younger, full of energy and pluck as he and the Doctor fought Daleks.Those days were long gone.

He didn't seem surprised to see her, but nor was he particularly pleased.

Resignedly he invited her in for tea. Had he been expecting an apology?

she asked, as they went through to the kitchen. Did he even want one?

No, he said, he just knew she still had questions.

`You are a journalist, after all,' he said. 'A man from the future's a scoop.'

Ìt's not so much that,' she said, eager to make friends. 'You mentioned some things last night that I've not been able to shake. I do have a few more questions.'

Ì see,' he said warily. She noticed he kept glancing out of the window.

He had opened the front door cautiously, now she thought about it. Did he think she'd brought the Doctor along?

Ì' m more interested in your own future,' she said gently. She had to convince him she was on his side. Which she was, of course. 'You were trying to tell the Doctor something last night.'

Isaac sat down with the tea. It might just have been the morning sunshine, but she'd not seen the darkness round his eyes last night. He

really had changed for the worse.

`The Doctor's right,' he said with a sigh. 'I can't tell you anything about what's going to happen to him. How we met, things we did. Nothing like that.'

`Was that what you tried to tell him? Something about his future?'

Ì shouldn't have even tried. I know the rules just as much as you do.'

Èven so - '

But he had clearly made up his mind - and from the weary way he looked it must have taken him all night. She wouldn't affect his resolve by force, she could see.

`There is something you could do for me, though,' he said.

Ànything'

He watched her for a moment, again making a difficult decision. He obviously concluded that she was worth the risk, and then got down on his knees. With ease he pulled at the skirting board under the kitchen cabinets.A long board of wood-effect plastic came away and Isaac began rooting around in the space behind. He emerged with a large brown envelope, the stiff-backed sort she used herself when sending manuscripts.The bashed corners suggested it had travelled well. Isaac got up (she glanced away as he rearranged his gown) and handed the envelope, this precious secret, to her.

`Go on,' he said with a funny look. The envelope was open, the sealing flap had lost its stick. Sarah gingerly removed the stack of pages inside.

There were probably fifty or sixty sheets in all. She could see at once that 67

there were various paper stocks and densities involved, and some pages were a slightly different size. It had taken him twenty years to assemble this, he had said. She looked over the first page, at what he'd written.

Ì don't read music,' she said, unsure why she felt so embarrassed, so wanting. Isaac was clearly pained by her confession. It had taken a lot for him to share this with her.

Ît's probably for the best,' he said, but his words sounded hollow and lifeless. Sarah carefully returned his work to the envelope, but he didn't take it from her.

`Would you hold on to it for me?' he said. 'Make sure it survives...'

He wouldn't say more. She couldn't get him to say anything, and suddenly he was making excuses about other things he had to be doing, commitments to the orchestra and so on. She knew it was a put off - if his schedule was so urgent he'd already have been up and dressed when she arrived. But he clearly didn't want her there, and she wasn't going to push him. She would just come back when she was in a stronger position.

She'd get someone to look at the music. Maybe she'd talk to Nikolai Faro, the Ambassador who had discovered Isaac, for herself. There'd be something, there had to be, something to draw him out.

He was brisk with her at the door, and then took her hand on an impulse and shook it. He really was nervy now, full of jitters and continually looking over her shoulder.

Ì'll take care of this,' she told him, hugging the envelope with her free arm,Ànd you'll be fine,' she added.

By the time she got back to UNIT, Isaac was already dead.

The Brigadier had taken her to the police station himself, keen to show support. He could have delegated, probably should have, but he had always been a doer, and it got him away from his paperwork. Miss Smith seemed grateful for the thought, though. Indeed she probably appreciated just getting away from the Doctor. He really wasn't good when it came to saying the right things. He could sound so uncaring.

In the car and in reception they had sat in companionable silence, respectful both to Isaac and to one other. When the officers took Sarah into the interview room, she surprised the Brigadier by asking him, simply and without fuss, to wait outside. Of course he did as she asked, but it bothered him. What did she think he'd do? He was there for her, not to take over the investigation. What didn't she want him to hear? If the Doctor did prove to be tied up in anything, it would be him who would have to sort it all out. He was just thankful he hadn't yet made the call to the immigration people. That would just have made this whole sorry business even more involved.

He made himself stop watching the clock. When they eventually 68

released Miss Smith, he was engrossed in a leaflet about keeping children away from fireworks (typical, he thought, you only ever see these things at police stations and hospitals - presumably long after it's too late).

Despite her efforts to walk tall, he could see she'd been crying. That was why she hadn't wanted him in there.The silly girl, she didn't want him to see.Actually he liked that.

'He called the ambulance as soon as I left him,' she said as he walked her back to his car. She tried to sound matter-of-fact, like this had been an information recce and hadn't been ghastly for her.`He must have made up his mind while I was there.'

The Brigadier thought it best to play along with her bravado. She certainly wouldn't like it if he tried to put his arm round her, would take it entirely the wrong way. Best to keep things strictly professional.

'I checked in with the Doctor,' he told her.`He's still as baffled as the rest of us. He has at least looked at that music you gave him, and he thinks it's important. Says it's like something he's heard before. He tried humming a bit of it to me over the radio, but then he reckons that there are various melodies all going on at once and it needs to be properly staged. I didn't make anything of it, anyway.'

`The police don't doubt it's a suicide.' She shrugged. 'They don't think there's a case any more. Now they've spoken to me there isn't anything to follow up'

`Tell that to the Doctor,' the Brigadier said. 'It's got his interest now.'

Nikolai Faro was genuinely sorry about Isaac and pleased to talk to anyone who had known him Welcoming the Doctor and his reporter friend into his sumptuous rooms in the embassy, he made every effort to be genteel and accommodating. The Doctor obviously wanted to know about his friend, the reporter wanted to extend an interview she had conducted with Isaac into a full feature on the poor man, his life as well *as* his work. Both clearly intended to ask him *why* Isaac had done such a thing, but their questions skirted the issue. Either they were nervous about confronting him openly, or they didn't actually want to find out.

He answered what questions they did ask him as openly as he could.

He had known Isaac for only a year or so, but the Doctor's name had come up a few times, and Isaac had spoken of him fondly.

Ìsaac, I think, saw you as an older brother, a mentor,' said Faro. He meant it as a comfort, the sort of thing you say at a funeral to the bereaved.

`Yes, well,' said the Doctor, squirming in his chair. For all the flaunting exhibitionist he appeared in those clothes, he didn't seem to like the attention.

`Can you tell me how you and Isaac met?' asked Miss Smith, neatly changing the subject.

'He came to me,' said Faro. 'In an interview I'd given, I said I hoped to introduce the peoples of the United Kingdom to our artistry and culture.

We were donating some artefacts to your British Museum for a special exhibition. I said that this was what being an ambassador was all about, championing our little nation, making links.'

Ìsaac approached you?' asked Miss Smith.

`Yes. As I said, about a year ago.'

`Did you know who he was? His reputation?'

`No. I'd never heard of him before.'

`But you thought he was good enough to bring him over here?' she asked.

`Yes. He showed me some of his work and it impressed me.'

Ànd he asked you to get him out of the country?'

`That's why he came to see me, showed me the music, yes. He didn't want to talk about his reasons, but I found out some things about him I don't know how useful this will be to you, of course'

`Go on, she said.

`The case for granting him asylum is... *was* based on some threats he

claimed to have received. I found out he'd been high up in *Ul Esdaphro*

- that means 'The Rebels' - during the 1950s. Some accounts say he was actually the right-hand man to Ettyn - who brought the government down in '53 if you don't know our history. Isaac's wife - she's been dead for years - may even once have been Ettyn's girlfriend. Accounts of those times are hard to come by and contradict each other, so it's not easy to know exactly what happened, or what anyone's role was in it all. But Isaac did feel there was something hanging over him from those days and desperately sought to escape'

The Doctor asked a question now. `May I ask, Dr Faro, what it was about the music that stood out?'

`Just reading it off the page impressed me greatly,' he said. 'It seemed so simple, so elegant if you just followed one part at a time, but combined altogether it was... transcendent.'

`Did it seem familiar to you at all?'

Dr Faro stopped, too shocked to say a word.The Doctor sat back in his seat smugly.Thoughts tumbled over each other in Faro's mind How could he have been so naive, so blind? *Of course* that had been what he had connected with in the music. Some part of it chimed within him, like he had heard it played before. Or not quite. It resembled something important and long forgotten, an echo of tune lying dormant in his head and still not tangible even now, even when he was looking for it.

'I don't know *what* it reminds me of; he said.I would not be able to tell you whose work it was he copied. But yes. Now you say it, Isaac's music...' He paused again, a new thought lighting up inside him 'You 70

don't notice it when the thing is played: he said.`But if you read the notes off the page...'

That's it exactly' beamed the Doctor. He leapt to his feet `Thank you, Dr Faro, you've been enormously helpful!'

He hurried out. Miss Smith took her time packing away her notebook and pen, obviously just as surprised by the Doctor's behaviour as Faro had been. She thanked him herself, asking if she could call during the afternoon if she thought of any details to check with him She also said she'd have a copy of the paper sent to him in the morning, so he could see what she'd said. Faro said he would look forward to that.

When she had gone, he stood at the window looking out over the busy street below. The Doctor was at the wheel of his remarkable-looking car, fidgeting eagerly while he waited for Miss Smith. Faro watched until Miss Smith appeared, taking her time as she clambered into the flying saucer.

She was teasing him.

As the car spun round on the spot and whizzed off down the road, Faro wondered what they were saying, what conclusions he'd helped them to, what her story would say. If she sent her telephone number along with the paper he would call her back, he thought.

But the paper never came.

Ìt really doesn't matter now,' said Sarah. She did not share the Doctor's conviction that this could all be sorted out.

The Brigadier had been on the phone much of the morning, trying to reach the Defence, Press and Broadcasting Committee. Since he often advised them personally himself, the fact they were not answering his calls was not a good sign. Sarah and the Doctor had sat in his office, talking quietly and waiting for some progress to be made. It was evident the Brigadier had finally got through to someone, and had no time for the efforts being made to wrong foot him. The Brigadier had already pulled rank, reminding them of what UNIT stood for, what part it played in the great scheme of things.

a *does* matter, Sarah: the Doctor said. 'If your editor's been told the story's covered under a D-Notice, it means they're claiming national security is at stake. Someone senior in the military or in the government is working directly against our investigation. Someone your editor's prepared to believe'

Sarah shrugged. Whatever the case, it had killed her story. If she had checked with her editor before writing up her piece, it would have saved wasting an afternoon.

The Doctor must have guessed the reason from her forlorn manner.

`We'll get this thing repealed: he reassured her. 'Your story will get told.

The Brigadier had evidently been put through to someone who could

answer his questions - and who knew what the questions were going to be. He had only just begun asking when whoever it was must have interrupted.The Brigadier listened for a good few minutes, his expression getting steadily graver.

All the while, the Doctor had grown more and more impatient.

Eventually he could stand it no longer:I hope you're not allowing them to batter you down,' he snapped.

The Brigadier answered him with a look that Sarah had never seen before: angry didn't begin to describe it.

Ì actually have the Doctor here,' he said into the receiver. 'If you'd care to repeat that back to him'

The Doctor wandered round behind the Brigadier's desk. He rolled his head and stretched his arms back like he was preparing for a boxing match, then took the receiver. The Brigadier stepped back out of the way.

He looked stunned.

`Now look here,' the Doctor started, sharply. Then he, too, was overruled. Sarah sat forward in her seat, expectantly.What on earth where they saying to him?

Àll right,' said the Doctor rather meekly. 'I understand.Yes, you too.'

He put the phone down, and collapsed back into the Brigadier's seat.

Sarah looked from him to the Brigadier, stood behind him by the window.

Neither would look at her. They looked like a pair of naughty schoolboys after being ticked off by the headmaster.

`Who was that?' Sarah asked. 'Who requested the D-Notice?'

The Brigadier took his time to answer. He nodded forward. 'He did,' he said.

The Doctor looked mournfully up at her.The edge of his mouth creased in a half smile. 'Or rather,' he said, 'I will'

The Doctor didn't blame the others for losing interest. Sarah was furious at him, despite his best efforts to explain. The D-Notice he had,

or would, request had ended the investigation as far as she was concerned.And their failure to sort it out had nothing to do with the terrible consequences of overstepping time. It made no difference what his future self was up to, she had said. He - the one of him here and now - had had his chance with Isaac and had blown it.That rankled with the Doctor more than anything because it was true. Wherever his travels took him, however long he took to meet Isaac, he had let him down when he was needed. Nothing he could do now would make amends for that.

Still, he refused to give up on such a tantalising mystery. He couldn't let the loose ends go. Why had Isaac died? What did the music signify? What linked it to the coup Isaac (and maybe himself) had taken part in twenty years before, if anything? Why did he recognise the tune? At three in the 72

morning the Doctor was still working away in his lab, puzzling over the manuscripts.

He had made copies so he could add his own notes, and these were scattered about the worktop and around him on the floor. He would glance from one page to another, seeking links or a springboard, convinced he would find something, somewhere at the heart of it all, he remembered. It was so frustrating!

Ì'll be here a while longer,' he called when someone poked their head into the lab. He looked round to see who it was, wondering if they'd make him some coffee.

He didn't recognise the two men who had entered the laboratory.They were tall and all in grey. Their eyes and skin were grey too. A grey like moonlit clouds, like eerie magic. They wore morning dress, strange and identical apart from their different buttonholes. One had a perfectly white tulip in his lapel, the other a black rose.

`How do you do gentlemen?' said the Doctor. 'Is there something I can help with?'

Black Rose knelt gracefully, and started gathering up the pages on the floor. White Tulip ignored the Doctor as he came over to the worktop. He took the envelope first, then lithely gathered up the Doctor's copies.

Èxcuse me,' said the Doctor, reaching for the man's wrist. The man struck out at him, but the Doctor caught his arm, pivoted down and round and rolled him over his shoulder, bowling him directly into the

kneeling Black Rose. The Doctor would have made a quip if they had given him time. But both grey men bounced to their feet like cats and came at him He feinted to one side as Black Rose flew at him, and brought the man down with a keenly aimed chop. But White Tulip bashed him in the nose with the back of his hand, and Black Rose, down on the floor, grabbed his ankle. The Doctor fell over backwards and that was all it took. He struggled to his feet as quickly as he could but by then they were gone.

`Wait!' the Doctor shouted, giving chase. But there was no sign of them , in the corridor outside the lab And all his copies of Isaac's music were lost with them.

Though she hadn't yet seen for herself, Sarah had heard several reports about the Brigadier's ill temper. The two officers on watch the night before had taken the worst of it, of course.And then Benton got a roasting when he reported that nothing had been found.The search had taken up the whole morning. When the Brigadier strode into the Doctor's laboratory later that day, his expression suggested the Time Lord was next for the chop. That momentarily changed as he tripped over the line of wires in the doorway and landed on his face.

'Do look out for the apparatus, old chap,' said the Doctor from where

he crouched in the corner. He hadn't even looked round, didn't see the Brigadier seething as he picked himself up. Sarah, perched up on the tabletop, swinging her legs in the space underneath, bit her lip. Her presence was enough to ensure the old soldier collected himself before starting on the blue murder. She watched him count slowly to ten. He looked around the room, at the coils of wire organised in some lunatic pattern all over the floor.

Ì do hope you're doing something constructive, Doctor,' he said gruffly.

` More than you've been doing, I should say,' replied the Doctor, still not looking back at him. He had some thrown-together mechanism in front of him, the sort of thing he dashed off all the time and which rarely worked.

He beavered away on it, leaving the Brigadier and Sarah to mug 'what can you do?' faces at each other. Then the Doctor used his sonic screwdriver to finish whatever he was making.

`There, that should do it!' He beamed as he got up. 'You can stay and

watch with Miss Smith if you like, Brigadier.'

`What have you been up to, Doctor?' the Brigadier muttered.

`My dear fellow, I've done what your men - sterling as they are - could not. I've found the two intruders.'

The Brigadier folded his arms. 'How on earth - '

`That's just the point, Brigadier,' the Doctor chided. 'They weren't "on Earth" at all.

Àliens, you mean?' said the Brigadier.

`Quite possibly,' said the Doctor. He began to connect some of the odd bits of mechanism on the worktop beside Sarah.

`The Doctor thinks that his attackers materialised in the lab,' explained Sarah. 'Rather than breaking in'

`That would explain how they got past security,' said the Brigadier. 'But can you tell for sure?'

The Doctor looked up from his work. He seemed weary, thought Sarah.

Some of the soldiers who had known him for years said he looked old and worn-out these days. Maybe he had just got fed up answering their stupid human questions, the hassle of it all.

`There are elementary tests for space-time scarring,' the Doctor said, irritably. `By a process of elimination you can determine whether you're the end point of a hyperspace tunnel or transmat linkage or what-have-you:

Ànd are we?' asked the Brigadier, obviously in no mood for the Doctor's flouncing.

`Yes, Brigadier,' said Sarah. 'The tunnel opened just about where you're standing'

The Brigadier stepped quickly forward towards the desktop and then looked back at where he had stood.

Ì can't see anything there,' he said.

`Well obviously not, Brigadier,' muttered the Doctor,Ìt's closed now.'

`Can you open it?'

`Not as such, no. But I can use the scar it has left behind to lead us back to wherever the tunnel was opened'

Ànd that will get you to your two grey men.' The Brigadier nodded.

`Want me to gather some men to help you apprehend them?'

The Doctor considered it. 'I'm hoping that won't be necessary,' he said.

Ì just want a quick chat with them.'

The Brigadier laughed. `This is driving you mad, isn't it? The not knowing?'

The Doctor didn't dignify that and continued with his work. 'Used to hate these things when I was at school,' he said - as much to himself as anyone,Òne of my old tutors used one to catch me stealing sweets from the school pantry. Ah, that should do it.

The Doctor hurried round to connect this last piece of equipment.

Looking at the complex, disordered set-up, Sarah wondered how the Brigadier had learned to cope with his freelance eccentric. But the Brigadier, for all he had criticised, looked on indulgently.

Soon the Doctor was satisfied. He got them both to stand behind the worktop, and told them not to come and help him if he looked like he was stuck. The Brigadier shook him cheerily by the hand when the Doctor tried to say a sombre goodbye. Evidently the old soldier didn't take any of this seriously. Or he was making it easier for the Doctor to do whatever absurdly dangerous thing he was about to. Sarah shook the Doctor's hand as well, but couldn't convince herself he could be in any danger really. Not pressing a switch down on just the other side of the worktop.

The Doctor looked quickly at them both one last time then pressed the lever.

There was a warbling from the machine behind them, the one he'd been working on when the Brigadier came in. The Doctor looked expectantly at the laboratory doors, as if willing the grey men he'd described to come walking back through them. Then, Sarah could see

something. It was like heat haze, a smearing of the lines of the doors.The air smelt of something sweet and tangy, alive with energy.

Then the Bri-

The

wormhole is wide open. He can see right down it, the lucent white membranous walls leading to a point of indistinct darkness far away at the end. He takes a step forward, then realises his friends have said nothing. Surely they are impressed. He looks back.

The Brigadier and Sarah stand stock still. Not even involuntary, reflex movements. They are not dead, just frozen in time. Time has stopped. His machine has not done this. So who?

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`We did, Doctor ' says a man in a neatly tailored pin-stripe suit who now stands at the mouth of the tunnel. He has not emerged from it, he is just suddenly there in front of it. He blocks the Doctor's way. The man raises his bowler hat cheerily

`You've come to explain all this, then?' he answers angrily angrily.

I'm afraid not,' says the man in the suit pleasantly. The story ends here for now'

`You're not serious.'

`You will understand. But not now'

Ì don't need to know about Isaac, but that music! I already know it means something. Its right on the tip of my tongue and I just need to know what!'

`You have had just a glimpse of something to come. That is all.'

Òf course its not!'

`This is not a choice I'm offering you.' The man in the pin-stripe suit does not say this last bit so pleasantly. He isn't really pleasant at all.

It'll drive me mad not knowing,' he replies bitterly. He is bitter because he will do what the man says. He takes a step back from the man, from the tunnel. How am I going to get any peace?'

The pin stripe man shrugs. `There will be times ahead,' he says, 'when you

will need something to keep you going.' He looks for a moment like he will say more, explain what that means. He raises his hat and is gone.

The clock on the mantelpiece ticks suddenly loud, too slow and not real as seconds start to pass by once more.]

-gadier turned to her to say something. A 'pop' from the machine behind them stopped him. They both looked back at the Doctor. The strange haze in the air had faded. Everything was back as it had been.

Ìt didn't work?' asked the Brigadier, sympathetically.

The Doctor didn't say a word. It wasn't just disappointment. If he had looked old before, that was nothing to the way he looked now. Sarah leaned forward and put her hand on his arm.

His friends could see he wanted to be alone and left him. He was grateful for that kindness. Alone in the lab, tired and worn out, he didn't know where to begin.

As he fussed with pulling the apparatus apart and putting it away, a bit of the melody he had tried to sing to the Brigadier over the radio came back to him unbidden.At first he tried to think of something else, anything that would come. But what came was the counter-melody, weaving in and out of and through and around the first tune.

He let the two phrases play inside him as he tidied up. Only as he came 76

to the end of his work did he realise he could not recall the third part.The notes were tantalising, just beyond his grasp.

The Doctor looked round the lab for some paper, eager despite himself to work it all out. If it took him the rest of his days, he would get it.

Some weeks later, RSM Benton looked in on the Doctor's lab. He felt wistful. UNIT headquarters was a very different place these days. The Doctor and Sarah were no longer about and things were quieter all round.

They had already sent the cars off to storage, to be properly looked after should the Doctor ever return.The familiar old lab would be stripped out to make room for computers, they said. Benton would have to learn to use them if they did. He didn't like the thought of that. Maybe he'd resign his commission before that day came, go do something else, something hands-on.

down to A shadow in the corner caught his eye, and he went over, squatting see what it was. A smart smoking jacket lay long discarded under one of the benches. He picked it up, bashed some of the dust off. It was the one the Doctor had worn when he'd changed, wasn't it? The one he'd died in...

Benton wondered what to do with it. It didn't seem right just to leave it here. Someone might pinch it.Then again, he didn't want to keep such a ghoulish relic for himself. Without really knowing why, maybe just to do something, he checked the jacket pockets. There was nothing in them. It didn't seem right for the Doctor's pockets to be empty.

And then Benton found the paper.

It was a scrap torn from something else, a triangular fragment beginning to yellow. Something had been written on it, though it was only when Benton held it up to the light he could see it wasn't writing. Musical notes were strewn messily across the page.

Benton knew the old Doctor's handwriting from years of supply requests and favours. But this was a cruel parody of that confident, spidery scrawl. Benton took a moment to realise what he was holding: the desperate jottings of a dying man.

For years to come, Benton would return time and again to three questions he could never answer. He couldn't shake them from his head.

How long was the Doctor travelling, dying from whatever that Tibetan lot did to him, before he got back to UNIT HQ?

Did he really not think he'd make it?

And, if the reborn man had discarded this once-so-important page, had he been right?

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POLYHYMNIA

The Muse of Sacred Poetry

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Hymn of the City

Sarah Groenewegen

The city was shrouded with the gossamer veil of long-wanted clouds and rain. Water misted down, the clouds like a gauze across the dark night sky hiding the full moon. Ace watched the Doctor as he worked in the lights shining yellow from the naval docks across the water. His fingers twisted wires into a sculpture of mess, and she doubted it - whatever *it* was -

would work.

`Time?' he asked, for the third time since they'd arrived.

About ten,' she said after checking his pocket watch, entrusted in her care as soon as they'd arrived.

`Can you be more exact, Ace?'

All right.Two minutes to ten,' she said, grumpily, and shifted her feet to be more comfortable.

`Good,' he muttered around a wire he'd stuck in his mouth while his hands were busy with other wires.

Ì can't believe there's a war on with all these lights.

He grunted some words she couldn't understand.

`Like that place over there,' she continued. 'It might as well have a neon sign advertising the fact it's a Naval Base.'

Àce,' he said, his tone a warning.

`Sorry, Professor.' She dug her hands in the pockets of her bomber jacket and snuggled herself into it against the gusts of wind and rain. Finally, he finished his frenetic wiring. He lifted a speaker to his ear and flicked a couple of switches. The moon broke through the clouds just as he beamed. 'What are you doing anyway, Doctor?'

He sighed, ever so softly. 'We're on an island, Ace. A very small island, and it will soon be a very good time to leave. If, that is, I'm right about where and when we are.'

'But can't we use the TARDIS?' she said, and instantly regretted it as he sighed again.This time his exasperation was obvious.

`She's still a little erratic,' he said. The words he didn't add hinted they

were lucky they were on land and not in the water. She could hear it lapping on the rocks below.

She frowned. 'Well, what are we doing here, anyway?'

`Shh.' He put his finger to his lips. He was looking out into the dark of the water, away from the docks. 'There it is:

`What?'

I 'The ferry. We don't have much time.'

'What ferry? You're not... Professor!'

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He was speaking into one of the wires, ignoring her. 'Hello, hello. Ferry captain?'

She was more surprised to hear a man squawk back, 'Hello, yes. Who is this?'

`Hush-hush business. My young friend and I were left on the island directly ahead of you by mistake. I'm afraid we need to requisition your vessel for a little while.'

Ace waited for the response. It could go one of only two ways, and despite all the time she'd spent with the Doctor she still expected the answer to be an indignant *get stuffed,* or an incredulous *get real.* But, no.

A third, inconceivable option, was the one the fates presented. The scratchy electronic voice said, 'Aye, aye, sir. We'll dock in two minutes, sir.'

`How...?'

But he still wasn't listening. Quicker than he'd taken to construct the radio out of rubbish, he deconstructed it, pulling the wires apart and stuffing the bits into bulging pockets.Then he was standing up, 'Come on, Ace. Our ferry awaits.'

He took her hand, guiding her through the trees and rocks, down the slight hill to the simple wooden wharf. In the distance, lights blinked, one set growing bigger and Ace realised it was the ferry the Doctor had ordered up like a home-delivered pizza. They were on the wooden planking as the boat motored alongside. One of the men working on

its deck spotted them and he waved, shouting, Àhoy there!'

The Doctor waved, then clamped his hand down on his straw hat to stop it from flying away as he did. His other hand, full of umbrella, grabbed Ace and she forgave him his prior refusal to answer her questions when she saw the glint of pure adventure in his grey eyes.Àce, when I say run ... '

`Run!' shouted Ace, like a child again, and they both ran, and jumped on to the deck of the ferry. The man grabbed Ace, and she shrugged him off, saying, Ì can look after myself.'

`Well, sir, miss,' the ferryman said, looking dubiously at Ace. 'You're not what I was expecting'

Òh, we're not all inclined to wear military clothing,' said the Doctor.

`Now, if I were you I would tell the captain to go back to the quay and call it a night.

`Sir, would that advice have anything to do with the activity at the Heads?'

The Doctor and Ace both turned to look at the new man who spoke.

Ah, Captain,' said the Doctor.

The man nodded, curtly.

`What activity are you referring to?'

There is a flotilla of boats near the Heads. They appear to be hunting for something, but there's been no alert sounded:

The Doctor, serious, nodded. 'I see. What time is it?'

The Captain looked at a pocket watch he kept in his jacket pocket.'Five past ten,`

`Captain, you have twenty-five minutes to take your crew, passengers and vessel to Circular Quay.'

`Why, sir? What happens at ten-thirty?'

`Yeah,' said Ace. 'What happens then?'

`Trust me' The way he said the two words was evidently enough for the ferry captain as he began to move and issue his orders.

`Doctor?' said Ace. 'Won't you tell me what's going on?'

She waited a little while for him to drag his attention away from what the crew was doing, but then he did turn to her and beckoned her to sit down on one of the benches. He leant close to her, and when he spoke it was barely audible above the sound of the ferry's chugging steam engines as they went underway. If I'm right, and from what the captain has said I think I am, at ten-thirty tonight a Japanese midget submarine will self-detonate between North and South Heads here in Sydney Harbour. That explosion will spark a search of the harbour for other midget submarines.

One of those submarines will fire its torpedoes at an American warship.

The fighting will last all night.'

`Wicked,' she breathed, and felt a thrill of excitement course through her body. Real war action. Wow.

But the Doctor shook his head, and even in the dim light she could see the despair in his eyes. 'No, Ace. There will be lives lost. Young lives.

Perhaps not on the terrible scale of other places and battles in this awful war, but dreadful. So very dreadful.'

'Is that why we're here, Professor? To stop it?'

`No,Ace. Our purpose here is much more grave.'

Ace shivered as she felt a gust of cold wind pass right through her.

Mrs Kitty Harris sat in her front room, waiting.The telegram had said her new billets would be arriving on the night of Sunday 31 May 1942. They were called Dr John Smith and Ace. *(What sort of a name was Ace?* Mrs Harris had wondered on first reading the message. She assumed he would **be** a pilot of some kind with a nickname like that.)Their arrival was meant to be tonight and it was getting late, but still she waited.There was no use grumbling about these military types.

While she waited she listened to a concert then a play on the wireless.

While she listened she knitted socks for the war effort. When she grew tired of listening and the concentration of the needlework, she brewed a **fresh** pot of tea and settled back in her armchair, shaking out her copy of **the** *Sunday Sun* and its supplements. She skipped the update of what was happening to their boys overseas in the war (she'd already read that for 83

clues about her husband, Peter), started to read one of the short stories but gave up and instead read the advice columns about growing chokos and other useful winter vegetables.

At 10.30 the grandfather clock in the hallway chimed the half-hour. Her other billet, Jed Allum, was still an hour away at his dance. As long as he didn't bring a girl home, she thought, the night would be quiet for her new arrivals, wherever they were.

A few seconds later she heard the boom of a massive explosion coming from the harbour.The sound of it made her collection of crystal rattle and tinkle, but none shattered over the edge of the shelf it sat on.

'Oh, my,' she said, suddenly shivering, and waited for more booms, the sound of aeroplanes and the air-raid siren as surely they must come. If they did she would have to prepare herself for what she would have to do, guests or no guests.

At 22:30 hours U.S. Marine Corporal Jed Allum left the party with a girl on his arm. He felt warm from the dancing and bourbon from earlier in the night; warmed now more by the fact the girl seemed happy enough to be with him. He looked at her and smiled his most charming smile.

Her face smiled back at him. She, too, was flushed. The colour looked good against the bright red lipstick she wore and her pale skin. Her hair was dark and styled according to the local fashion. Fashion that was a season behind what he knew, but then this place was messed up as far as all the seasons were concerned.

Take the weather, for example. Back home the nights would be getting warmer, not colder like here. Not that he thought it was cold, certainly not as cold as the winters he was used to in North Dakota.As far as he could tell most of the folks here had never even seen snow. But the girls thought it was cold in the here and now Even this one. She tottered on her heels as she pulled her wrap tighter around her thin shoulders. He squeezed her tighter, too, to hold her upright and close to him. 'You OK, miss?' he drawled, accentuating his accent the

way these girls liked.

She giggled, said something he couldn't understand, and seemed to sink into his grasp.

"Uh-huh,' he responded to whatever it was she'd said:You know, honey,'

he went on regardless:The night is still young. How about you and me go to Kings Cross or Darlinghurst and take in some action there? I know a place we can get some drink if you like'

`No. I've had fun, but I've work tomorrow. I should go home'

"Aw, honey.You're young.You don't want to turn away a guy who might not live to see another Christmas' He smiled to take the edge off his words.

Ì would like to, Corporal, but...' She giggled, plainly nervous.

ÒK. How about a compromise. I know a place out of the wind and rain where we can sit back and stare up at the stars awhile.Then I'll take you to your tram stop and you can go home.You've plenty of time until the last one:

Under his protective arm he felt her relax. Àll right,' she said, and he knew he'd been right about her not liking the idea of visiting a sly grog shop.

And then they heard the boom of the explosion down on the harbour.

He let go of her as they both turned to see the orange glow of the aftermath.

Òh,' she said, putting her gloved hand to her open mouth. Then she turned to join the crowd gathering outside the department store where the party had been held. She disappeared from his sight, his consciousness, his life.

Jed Allum stood, and stared, and wondered if the hell he'd seen a few week ago up north in the Pacific had come here to Sydney to haunt him.

The Doctor and Ace had been five minutes in a tram rattling away from the quay when the submarine exploded, right on time by the

Doctor's prediction. They heard it, and the rattling of windows, but none of the dusky lights flickered and the tram didn't stop its lurching journey up the hill of George Street.

One of the few other passengers asked the old man conductor why they weren't stopping. 'No siren,' he said. 'We won't stop till we hear the air-raid siren,`

`But it's not an air raid,' said Ace to the Doctor, her voice low so none of the other passengers could hear.

The Doctor nodded. There was silence for a while. Expectant. Only the rattling of the old wooden tram made any noise.

`Where are *we* going?'Ace asked him at last.

`To visit an old friend'

Of course, she thought.

Madame Li was packing up after a long night telling good news fortunes to American soldiers and sailors. She first put up the closed sign, disappointing some GIs, but her crabby old woman act somehow made it better for all concerned. All the brave soldiers she'd ever known had crumbled when an old woman said an emphatic no. Then she tidied up the cards and knick-knacks that made the dingy shop hers.

She grumbled when she heard the insistent rap of knuckles on the door, then the windows. She hobbled over, a clawed hand clutching the ivory dragon handle of her walking stick. With her other hand she started to gesture at the sign, but then she recognised who was standing there, raising his hat and smiling like a polite loon.

Smiling in return, she straightened up to unbolt the door. Her hands shook themselves free of the crone claw act to make the work quicker.

Ah, Doctor. How nice to see you again. It's been too long. Come in before the young ones think I'm still open for business'

She smiled still as he politely held back to allow his young female friend to enter the shop first. `Wow,' the girl said, looking about her with the awe of a child.Yet she didn't look like a child. More like a young woman who had already seen more than most her age.

Underneath a black jacket festooned with colourful patches she wore a dress that looked quite fashionable, and boots of practical comfort. She hefted a haversack over a shoulder, and wore her light brown hair in a red hair net to keep it in style.

The Doctor stepped in and helped Madame Li lock the door again.

`Thank you, Doctor,' she said.`Come, both of you, to the kitchen out back.

I have tea - both English and Chinese. It will only take a few moments to brew.'

`Thank you,' said the Doctor. 'We'll have whatever you are making'

She bustled forth, confident her visitors were following. She heard the girl whisper to the Doctor, `0i, Professor, so who is the old woman?'

She also heard the Doctor chide his young friend, whose name was Ace, she learned. Ace's reference to old reminded her she still had her business face on.Time enough to address that, she thought, as she fired up the gas burner on the stove, poured water into the kettle and placed it on the blue flame. 'Excuse me, Doctor, Ace,' she said. 'Please make yourself at home in here. I have some things to do before I can join you'

She left them to it, Ace asking questions the Doctor either answered or skirted around. She smiled, remembering her own questions of him, and how he had played those same games. Sighing, she went outside to where she could no longer hear them. She picked up her cloth, wet it with the tap water, and wiped her stage make-up from her face. She sighed again, and looked up at the stars between the clouds and the criss-cross light beams searching for something in the sky. Then she wiped off the water and returned to the kitchen.The kettle was whistling, and the Doctor was busy with teapots and her dried jasmine flowers. The sight warmed her heart with soft memories. If it had been anyone else tinkering with her herbs she would have unleashed her fury. The Doctor, though, was a different matter.

`Doctor,' said the girl, Ace. Madame Li realised she was staring at her, looking and sounding worried.

Madame Li smiled kindly at her. 'I've found that looking young does not carry the same weight when one is telling the fortune of another. The customers expect certain things, and I try to accommodate them'

Òh,' the girl said, her expression adding that she recognised the young
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Chinese woman standing in front of her had just been an old lady, and was impressed.

Ì have been rude,' she said, as she collected three of her best china teacups. 'I know who you are, Ace, but unless the Doctor has been forthcoming in my absence, you do not know who I am'

Ace shook her head, and glanced back at the Doctor with a look that said so much.

` My name is Li Chen Mei. Please call me Mei. And I think I know why you and the Doctor are here. Once we have had our tea, I will collect it for you, Doctor.'

It took Corporal Jed Allum half an hour to stride through Hyde Park, then cross the Domain to the entrance to Garden Island and his base.There he was greeted by an Australian sentry who was more interested in what was happening in the harbour than checking identification papers. Once waved through, Allum was surprised to see lights still blazing from the repair works at the docks.

Maybe the explosion had just been an accident. On the way down he hadn't heard any more gunfire, and no planes droned from above.

Near the barracks he saw one of his men. `Kaunitz! What the hell's going on?'

Hiya, Corporal' The New Yorker saluted. 'There was an explosion up near the Heads. The reports are all confused. Some cynics reckon it was one of the Aussies just dropping a depth charge by accident, but others reckon it might be a Jap sub. Could explain the plane that buzzed the city yesterday.'

Allum nodded just as the USS *Chicago* opened fire. Instinct bred of their recent experiences in the Coral Sea made both men duck, even though the destroyer was moored some way away.They both straightened up and watched as tracer fire stuttered out from the *Chicago's* turrets.

`Geez; said Kaunitz. 'That's no accident and I doubt this is no drill'

`Yeah,' said Allum as the air-raid siren finally sounded.

Mrs Harris was tiring of waiting for her tardy guests so she started to play the game of if-they-don't-show-in-five-ten-fifteen-minutes-then-I'm-locking-

. up-and-going-to-bed.

At precisely the same time her grandfather clock began chiming 11 o'clock she heard another explosion, this one less loud than the first of the night. It was followed by a spurt of gunfire, then nothing. She had enough time to grumble to herself about the inconsideration of the Navy practising their bombing in the middle of the night, then the air-raid siren started. She cocked her head to listen for planes, but there was nothing 87

further. No planes, no more bombs, nothing on the wireless. No point in going to the shelters because it probably wasn't real.

She went to her kitchen and prepared a mug of Ovaltine. Carefully holding the mug so she didn't spill the warm milk, she returned to her armchair. Just as she settled, another series of explosions rang out from the harbour, and it was a miracle she didn't lose the steaming drink all over her when she started at the noise. Òh, dear,' she said as she settled again and pondered how she might find out if it was the start of the invasion, or not.

And she thought that perhaps all the activity explained why her guests were late. If they were connected with the military, as she supposed, they'd most likely be busy. She could interrogate them about the explosions when they finally arrived.

The girl people called Ginny had arrived in Sydney earlier that day. She had appeared with little more than the simple cotton dress she wore, and the memories of disturbing dreams.

She'd walked a lot of the way in her journey east, asked lorry drivers for a lift (the kind ones had let her clamber in the back with their dogs and produce, the unkind ones had told her exactly how they regarded her ancestry), and finally jumped on a freight train the Sydney side of the Blue Mountains. Now she was in the city her dreams had told her about, but those dreams were silent now and she didn't know where to go.

No matter, she thought with a patience belying her apparent years. She would find a place to sleep, to dream, and then she would know where to go and what to do.

Now she followed what she knew from more ancient dreams. She followed the path hugging the southern side of the harbour, and where she couldn't walk on the water's edge she walked through quiet and dark streets.As she passed one of the houses in the place long called Woollahra she felt a lurch in her stomach like she was in immediate danger. She stopped walking and looked at the house. It seemed no different from most of the other houses around it, but the feeling persisted.

Then she heard the boom of another explosion, followed by the rat-tat-tat-tat of a smaller gun, and the noise distracted her from the strange feeling she'd felt. She looked across at where the water was and saw fireflies of red and orange light chase each other through the sky, and then there was the mournful wail of a siren.

She shrugged her bony shoulders and decided to ignore the whitefella business. The feeling she put down to the sounds of battle that had erupted.

The call of her dreams was much more important, so she followed that.

*

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On hearing the siren begin its yowling, the Doctor checked his pocket watch. He frowned. 'Eleven o'clock. Right on time,' he muttered, more to himself than to her,Ace realised.

`So, is that the air-raid siren?'Ace asked.

`Hm:

`Thought so. It sounds just like the siren from *Two Tribes'* Silence, and she wished Mei would hurry up and return. 'The Frankie Goes to Hollywood song,' she tried again, but was met by more silence. 'Does that mean there's an air raid?' she asked, finally, wanting to break the unsettling quiet inside the kitchen.

Ùsually. Not in this case, though' Then his mood did change and he broke into a beaming smile. 'Actually, it's very strange, but both Sydney and Melbourne prepared most of their defences against an air attack. Yet the only real danger they faced in this war was an attack by sea. Puzzling, isn't it?'

From his tone, she expected him to lean over the table to tweak her nose, and she didn't want to play.'What's puzzling is how much you know about it all,' she grumbled, then yawned. 'Is she going to be long?'

Ì apologise, Doctor and Ace, for keeping you,' said Mei from behind Ace.

Ace started, `No. I'm sorry. I didn't mean...'

`No offence is taken. I have what you came for, Doctor.'

Ah,' and now he looked like a child at Christmas as he saw the small parcel in their host's hands.

Less than ten minutes after the *Chicago* opened fire, Corporal Allum and Private Kaunitz reported for duty and were told to stand steady. Command didn't know exactly what was going on, and all the highest ranks were still at a garden party being held in their honour. Unofficially, it did look *as* though the Japs had infiltrated the incomplete Australian defences, and maybe one enemy sub had been destroyed.

Then one of the Australian ships - Allum wasn't sure which one -

opened fire away from where he and Kaunitz stood, joined now by other members of their company. Kaunitz and the others leant back against the wooden wall of one of the huts.Allum watched them as they relaxed into watching the show. He, though, felt his anger build, not letting him relax *as* they did.The lights still blazed around the harbour, even the ones here *at* the base. The workers had all downed tools, watching the gunfire and explosions and offering drawled explanations like the experts they weren't.

Where in heck were their orders? Where in heck was someone who could order these imbeciles to douse their lights so the place wouldn't be lit up like a giant target?

As if in answer, the lights winked out around the base, and other lights 89

joined them finally in their deaths. Despite that, a voice in Allum's head raged that this war would be better fought if he were in charge. If Kaunitz or any of the others had looked they would have seen a blood vessel near his temple tic, and his hands clench and unclench.

The lights had disappeared around Ginny as she left the harbour shoreline. Even the moon had gone, veiled by the clouds, but she still knew the way even though parts of the landscape had changed. Shapes of the whitefella houses stood where before there had been shrubs and trees or rocks. The paths of her dreams were no longer passable, so she followed the new ones, trusting the compass of her old dreams to know she was travelling in the right direction.

She walked up the short rise and saw the gap between the two cliffs.

She turned to her right, away from the whitefella warrior camp guarding the southern head of the harbour. The path up the cliffs had remained mostly unchanged from what she had known from her dreams. Sandstone slabs with shrubs growing out of the cracks, plants designed to withstand both the wind and salt water, and the sun when it shone.The plants were short, plump, spiky. Designed to survive, and survive they did. Survived as they had for millennia.

She only noticed the plants because they looked right against her dreaming memory. Other things looked wrong. Huge guns pointed up.

They were surrounded by whitefellas in their dark uniforms.They were as obvious in the bad light as Ginny was invisible. Silent as a ghost, she found the place she was looking for along the cliff top, nestled between two gun posts.

Then she ran

and jumped

Ace couldn't understand the Doctor's haste as they walked hurriedly away from Mei's shop, through the dark and quiet streets. It was raining again.A light shower that seemed somehow heavier than Ace's memories of England's rain. More tropical. But this was Sydney, Australia, and it wasn't meant to rain in Sydney, was it?

The Doctor was oblivious. Man on a mission, he was, again. A mission she didn't know anything about, except it was probably all about the box Mei had given him. Not that she had any idea what it was beyond its description, and the Doctor was in his not-telling-her-anything-in-response-to-her-asking mood, so she gave herself fully over to the doctrine of not even asking.

So, she followed him along streets laid with tram tracks and those without. They went over a short wall, through a garden bed and a park, then down a big road into a valley and up again to a place that

looked a 90

bit like Piccadilly Circus. There were crowds of people about. American and Australian soldiers and women in the tart's uniform of red lipstick and fur stoles.The men had the bleary-eyed look of too much alcohol and too little sleep. Ace wanted to ask them why they weren't doing anything about the gunfire they'd heard again in the distance. She saw some of the women had heard the sounds from the harbour below, but they chose to keep plying their trade, or tried to lure the men into the doorways where snatches of big band swing music played.

Ace kept following the Doctor through the crowd, and they broke free of the lights and headed down another hill. This time they followed a narrow street lined both sides with terrace houses, neat in their symmetry.

Then the Doctor stopped, so suddenly Ace that nearly ran into him.

Everything was silent. Waiting. As the Doctor took off his hat there was a tremendous

explosion that shook the ground where they stood. Over the houses, Ace saw the orange-red fireball as it seemed to leap up, hover, then fall again. Behind it, she could see the silhouette of the bridge and she thought the scene was at once the most beautiful and the most horrible thing she had ever seen.

Beside her, the Doctor shook his head, muttering the word 'Terrible'

over and over again.

` What was that?' she said, awed.

`The sound of twenty-one young men dying.'

Although they had been on the other side of Garden Island when the missile had hit,Allum and his company of Marines had felt the earth rock as though they were on board their ship when a shell had hit. The explosion itself had been so loud none of them had heard it, and now Allum's head was ringing and everything sounded swathed in cotton bandages.

As one, he and his men had run towards where the fireball had lifted from the water, then down again. By the time they arrived, the flames had died down but still burned on the water.The stink of fuel and

smoke was thick in the air.

`Looks like they missed the *Chicago!'* Private Holmes shouted.

Elation, for a moment.

But what had the Japs hit?

One of the Dutch sub-mariners, now seconded to the Royal Australian Navy like all his countrymen stuck here, joined them. In his impeccable English he told his American buddies that his old boat, the *K IX,* had been hit. 'Nobody on board her, though,' and their elation continued.

Then more men arrived. Sailors and dock workers.Americans, Brits and Aussies. One of the ferries had been hit. The *Kuttabul,* they learned. Digs 91

for Aussie and British sailors, some of whom had been on board. No way could they have survived the missile.

Their elation died.

Finally, then, a U.S. Marine sergeant showed up. He told the men to stand down. Go back to their billets.There was nothing they could do.

is

Allum wanted to punch him.

The Doctor knocked on the door with his usual authority.Three raps,Ace counted. A few moments later the door opened. Framed by dim yellow light was a woman with short wavy hair. She was about as tall as the Doctor and Ace, Ace noted, but with a figure that made her waist look like a wasp's.

` Mrs Harris, I presume,' said the Doctor beside her. Hat in the air, then down again. All his sad weariness gone, unless you knew where to look, thought Ace.

Àre you Dr John Smith?' the woman said. Ace was surprised to hear pure Cornwall in her voice.

`Well, I prefer to be called just Doctor.' Ace was more surprised to hear the note of surprise in the Doctor's voice.

Ì was expecting two men,' she continued.

Ah.This is my friend,Ace.'

`Really?' Ace could see the woman's pencil-thin eyebrow rise in its cynicism. 'Well, you'd both better come in. I should shut the door against all that nonsense going on in the harbour.Your lot, I suppose,' she said to the Doctor as he followed Ace inside.

`Not my lot,' he said.

She grunted.

Ace ignored the conversation between the Doctor and Mrs Harris as she entered the small loungeroom. It was comfortable, she thought. All warm colours like her Gran's place in Streatham. There were black-and-white photographs on the walls and the mantelpiece of serious people in various costumes dating from all the eras since photography had started.When she turned and could see Mrs Harris in the light, she could see the similarity with her and most of the portraits. She could also see that the Doctor had won her over. The older woman was laughing, her bright blue eyes sparkling with a life absent in all the photographs. He, too, was smiling, but Ace saw the sadness lurking in the wrinkles lining his face. She saw it and wondered at the effect twenty-one dead strangers had had on him.

Ah, Ace.' He turned his attention to Ace and she felt a lurch of foreboding in her stomach. She watched as Mrs Harris left them to put the kettle on. He walked over to her. 'I would like you to do me a favour.'

`Let me guess,' she began. 'Stay here while you go off to have fun.' But she did stop herself from pouting.

`No,' he shook his head. Ì want you to look after this' He handed her the small box Mei had presented to him. 'It's extremely important that it not be damaged in any way.'

`What is it?'

À box'

`What's in it?'

`Nothing'

`What's it do?'

`Nothing' And as he smiled she thought she could see some of the millennia of horror and beauty he had seen, and she wondered at it.

The sergeant had gone, leaving them to disperse. Allum and his men looked at each other, knowing what each other was thinking without having to say anything: *Go to their billets?While there's action going on?*

No way, Jose.

For a second, politeness made Allum think he ought to contact Mrs Harris and let her know he would be late, but he dismissed that thought straight away. She'd have to be deaf to not know something was up and that he'd be needed. Her husband was a soldier over in Tobruk or Palestine, and she knew when duty was duty. It was one of the things he liked about her and almost made up for her incessant recourse to cups of tea when what he really wanted was coffee, and her insistence that the lamb served up for dinner was decent enough to eat. It wasn't as though she was Australian and had to defend the so-called meat.

`Come on, then,' he said to his men, spurring them on to action of some sort.

They got their hands dirty and bloody by helping to pull the debris and bodies out from the water. It was the focus he needed to distract him away from the uselessness he felt at not being out on the water hunting the enemy.

Then another feeling started to gnaw at him. Small niggle at first, growing into something more. Like hunger. At first a bearable nothingness making itself felt, then growing into a nothing you couldn't ignore. He tried to bury the feeling with the work, but that was soon over, with all the men helping despite their orders. And then he found he didn't want to go back to his billet when there was nothing more they could do to extend their stay.

Politeness be damned.

The dark of the night matched the dark nothing niggling at his soul.

Snap go the cards as they matched up the images, and the image of the childish card game failed to alleviate his mood, so he walked.

He walked east, towards the Gap, and he didn't even know why.

He had left her. She knew he bloody would and he had.

He'd given her the box, supped politely at the too-strong tea Mrs Harris had provided, and then left. `Tell me if anything unusual happens: he told Ace at the door.

`Where are you going?' she asked, sulkily, and hated herself for the petulance she felt.

`The Gap,' he said.And he was gone, not telling her where or what that was.

She helped Mrs Harris tidy away the tea things, and followed her up the stairs to the guest room. 'Where's Mr Harris?' she asked, trying to make light conversation.

`He's with the AIF. Not sure where he is.'

Òh. It must be awful, not knowing: Echo of another conversation she'd had not so long ago.

Mrs Harris pursed her lips. 'No sense in complaining.'

Ace had just nodded and hadn't attempted to pursue any more conversation.

In the room, she put the box on the bedside table and her haversack on the bed. She sank on to the bed and inwardly raged against the Doctor.

Why can't he trust me?

Then she looked at the little box still wrapped in the cloth and string.

She wondered about opening the package to have a look. The Doctor hadn't said not to, and now the idea was out it became too hard to ignore, despite the conflicting feeling ingrained by teachers and her mum:'Don't touch!'As soon as she thought that, she reached out to it.

It was just a box. She didn't know what it was made from, but guessed jade from its light lime colour. It had raised Chinese characters on it, and dragons chasing each other, playing with fireballs. She couldn't see any way of opening it, and guessed it was one of those infuriating Chinese puzzle-boxes. She shook it near her ear and didn't hear anything rattling inside it.Then she wrapped it up again and put it

into her jacket's inside pocket where it fitted as snugly as a packet of cigarettes. It would be safe there.

In the distance the crump of more explosions put paid to any notion of going to sleep right there and then. But she did turn out the light so her host would think she had gone to bed, and now Ace listened out for what Mrs Harris might be doing. It sounded like she was locking up and organising the house for the night. She heard windows being closed, then the back door open, then shut, in a quiet way like she didn't want her guest to hear it. Then she heard the squawk of some chickens, and the mad flapping of wings and then sudden silence after an animal's shriek.A few moments later she heard the door open and shut again, and the sound of a bolt slide home, still with the odd pretence of trying to be quiet.

Why would Mrs Harris be going out so late to kill a chicken?

Ace strained her ears to hear other sounds, but there was nothing.

The Doctor walked through the streets thinking of everything and nothing. His feet led him exactly where he needed to go, so he trusted them as he always did.

The moon broke through the clouds again, lighting up the streets the way the street lights didn't. He was aware of some people sitting on their first-floor verandas overlooking the harbour and the fireworks. Others were quietly packing up their cars to go. Other houses were dark and quiet, either vacant or with their owners battening down the hatches for the storm that was suddenly too close.

Some dogs barked their greetings to him as he passed, and the odd cat mewled. Mostly, though, he passed unnoticed, which was what he wantFd.

When it started to rain again he put up his umbrella. Without a pause he kept walking east.

The dreams were more violent than normal. Like the story they were telling was about to reach a conclusion.

The dreams always began the same way.

The Doctor had come to visit as she knew he would. Hoped he would, yet knowing he would take his time and when it was time he would

be there.

Time was so long, she mused as she started awake from the dream and tried to reach that place where slumber would come once again. The dream would only let her see snatches of the story.

Her thought, as sleep crept through her body, stealing her consciousness again, was of the Doctor's words so long ago when he'd told her what she was: 'Mei, you have a gift. People have murdered people like you in trying to unlock your secrets. Guard it, and your life, well. For you can be killed. Just not by the means that normally befall human beings' Then he'd gone...

...only to come back in her dreams in a way that he hadn't that evening.

In the dream he was as she'd first known him. Larger than life and wearing the most shockingly colourful coat. Loud and bold, and yet gentle underneath all the bluster.

He was just there. Standing in her apothecary while she made him tea.

He was talking, and while she couldn't hear him she knew what his meaning was. He was telling her there was danger. For her, for him, for the world. He needed the box, and a room to stay. She would know when, and she had. In her waking life she had done as he'd asked. She would do anything he ever asked of her.

Now he had become frantic when he realised she couldn't understand what he was saying. So he began miming something that looked like he was weaving cloth, then ripping it to shreds. When she continued to look dumbly at him, his movements became more frenzied. Over and over he did the mime until she saw blood on his hands like the threads that weren't there were cutting into his fingers and his face screwed up to scream: 'WHY CAN'T YOU HEAR ME, ME ?'

Only she woke before she actually saw him shout.

Ace's eyes had adjusted to the gloom as she sat on the bed, listening for more sounds of activity from her host. There had been no hint of Mrs Harris climbing the stairs, for which she was pleased. In the first few moments after hearing the nocturnal chicken homicide she'd given in to the slasher film fancies of Mrs Harris creeping up the stairs with blood and feathers all over her to terrify her guest.

Her.

But Mrs Harris hadn't come up the stairs, and now Ace thought it was time for her to have a look to see what was going on.

She glanced at the haversack still on the bed, and decided to take her torch and leave everything else. She stuffed it in one of her jacket's pockets, and then she stuffed one of her cans of nitro-9 into the other pocket. Just in case.

Then she upped from the bed, and as quiet as she'd ever been as a kid at home in Perivale she opened the door and sneaked out on to the landing.

Mrs Harris heard the sounds of more gunfire splutter spasmodically out from the harbour and the noise sent shivers down her spine.

After the girl, Ace, had gone upstairs for bed she glanced at the photograph of Peter, her husband. He looked sternly proud at her as he always did and she wondered at where he might be. Wondered if he was in Libya where the Australians were holding back the Italians and Germans, or still in Palestine training. Wondered if he'd be able to write to her to let her know.

The grandfather clock ticked and tocked another minute away and those sounds in the sudden silence spurred her into action. It was nearly midnight.The enemy was here; that she now knew since the Doctor had told her.

It was time she did what had to be done. Death of a cockerel before midnight using an instrument belonging to her instrument. She'd chosen Jed Allum's razor blade, which still had spots of blood and his dark whiskers on it from his ablutions before going to his dance It mixed with the blood and black feathers of the rooster as she prepared the dead bird 96

according to the way she was meant to. The way her mother had taught her, and her mother had taught her, *ad infinitum.*

And she stood, waiting for the midnight hour to toll before she would read what was there in the blood and feathers and hair.

She was oblivious to Ace on the stairs above, looking down on her.

Time drove him to seek out an automobile.There wouldn't be the time for him to get to the Gap if he kept walking. *(Why was it so important*

to get there? **But he didn't stop to try to answer the question whispering at the edge of his subconscious.)**

The few cabs about were going away from the noises of battle too close on the harbour, so he had no luck there. He should have requisitioned **a** jeep from the base, but it was too late now to go back.

Here on the streets of Woolloomooloo there were automobiles parked on the streets.

Ready for the taking, a **voice told** him.

And he took a well-kept 1930s model Ford. Its engine kicked into life and he roared it up the streets slick with rain in a race against what he didn't know.

The dream had returned to Ginny as she knew it would.

Their song was spinning a web like that of a spider A shroud for the world's life.

Wordless yet holy, was the song. It spoke directly to the earth, water

air and fire. Its purity was absolute, powerful yet fragile. Balance.

Rips appeared, and figures struggled to mend it while she kept singing its existence. Three figures. One like her; another woman; and the man who wore many faces and wasn't really there.

And the woman/man she saw who was trying to tear the web as the others mended it. As the woman/man tore at the material the song became discordant.

Ginny woke.

Ginny smiled, but she lay still in the small cave under the lip of the cliff **the** whitefellas called the Gap.

The clock chimed its twelve sombre notes and Ace watched as Mrs Harris jerked into life once more. She was stabbing and ripping into the bird's carcass with the blade and Ace suddenly didn't want to watch.

She crept down the stairs, along the corridor, and easily unlatched **the door and made it outside without Mrs Harris racing after her with that razor.**

Outside it was raining and dark, the moon obscured again by the clouds. She looked up and down the street, not knowing which way was the way to this Gap place, or how far away it was. She felt the familiar 97

surge of anger build against the Doctor and her frustrated tears threatening to betray her.

Then she realised the box in her pocket was making a noise every time she faced a particular way. She stopped, faced that way and listened.

`Weird,' but maybe...

She took a few steps along the street in that direction, and the noise settled into a song with no words. She listened, and walked, and started to jog, then run, using the song as a radar to find her way.

The Ford's wheels squealed to a stop near where the lighthouse normally shone its warning lights out to the shipping on the Pacific Ocean. That light had been extinguished, replaced by the solid yellow beams of search lights stabbing through the clouds to find the enemy.

The enemy that wasn't in the sky. That wasn't even in the water below them. Not the true enemy. It was in the earth,Allum knew.

He cut the engine to his borrowed automobile, and left it there, parked askew to the edge of the road. The moon broke through the clouds and he saw three Aussie soldiers loitering near their artillery post. He ran towards them.

`Hey, mate,' called out one of them.'Do you know what's going on down there?'

'F.nemy,' Altura gasped, barely aware of what it was the soldier had said as he kept going through.

One of them grabbed his arm. 'Hey, mate,' his voice threatening enough to break Allum's drive towards the enemy.

He stopped. Looked at the soldier. Blinked. You *don't understand,* his mind screamed, but he couldn't get the words out.

Then he saw a ghost flash past, heading down the hill from where he'd come. *The enemy.* He shrugged off the holding hand and ran after it.

Ìt's just a cat, mate,' called Corporal Moir.

`Bloody nutter, if you ask me: mumbled Private Bilson.

`Yanks,' was all Private Kenworthy said, as though it explained everything.

The three soldiers resumed their vigil of the harbour below them.

Running is too slow, was the message Ace had received from somewhere.

She had to get to the place she was aiming for - not the Gap any more, somewhere nearer - sooner than her two legs could carry her.

Without thinking, she tested the door handles of the odd cars parked along the road.The third along gave way and she clambered in. She looked at the steering wheel, blinked, and trusted in the wordless song to guide her in what to do.The engine spluttered into life, the car lurched until she 98

got the right levers and switches pressed, and then the engine roared and she released the brakes and pressed down on the accelerator.

Allum followed the enemy down to the Watson's Bay jetty, then left along the sand where the salt water splashed at his dress uniform shoes.

Then the enemy was clambering up the rocks of a small cliff. He found energy from somewhere and sped faster along the small beach. Then he was at the foot of the rocks and climbing up where the enemy had gone.

For a second he waited at the top of the cliff. He couldn't see where the enemy went, and then suddenly that didn't matter.

He ran, not caring as the shrubs caught on his uniform and ripped it.

Not caring as he slipped in the mud, stumbled on tree roots, but somehow never lost purchase as he ran.

The wordless song told her she had to leave the car. She killed the engine, left the vehicle standing with its door hanging open, and ran into the pocket of bushland.

The tree canopy vaulted like a church's ceiling and blocked any light that eked through from the moon behind the clouds. Then she was out into a clearing and the moon escaped and lit the place like a spotlight.

Ace stopped running. Panting, leaning over to ease a stitch, she picked up a rock lying at her feet.

The song made her walk to where she saw a black woman - aboriginal, she realised - wearing a simple summer dress, stand to confront an American GI who had just stumbled out from the trees on the other side of the clearing.

Ace watched as the GI roared suddenly and ran at the woman.Tackled her to the ground.

Ace woke enough from what had gripped her to realise what he was doing. 'OW and she ran with the rock and smashed it down on the GI's head and pushed to get him off the woman.

ACE!' the Doctor bellowed from where he stood.

He watched as Ace stepped back, letting the rock fall back to her feet.

He watched her as she watched the man not get up.

Àce,' he said, shaking his head sadly. He walked over the grass to join Ace and the other woman sitting still and staring at the felled soldier. She was singing a wordless song.

Ace,' he said gently.`Give me the box.'

She did so, silently. She, too, was staring now at the woman who sang.

He knelt and handed it to the woman She took it, and smiled with bright white teeth glowing against her black skin. She nodded, but said nothing, just kept singing.

'I was supposed to give you this a long time ago,' he said, apologetically.

The woman shook her head, not losing her smile but finally stopping the music:No, Doctor.The time is now.The dream said so.You must give this to the other one:

`Now?'

`You'll know when.'

'I need you at the house!' **the Doctor had yelled. Not what she'd**

thought he'd yelled, but now she knew.

It was time and the dream no longer let her sleep.

Li Chen Mei went from her bed and dressed. She went outside to the alleyway where she kept her bicycle. She mounted it, and rode through the deathly quiet streets to the address where the muses had told her to send the Doctor and his friend.

Ace watched as the aboriginal woman walked away towards where the soldier had come crashing through the trees. Her head started to clear as the aboriginal woman moved further away, her memory demanding her to turn her attention to important things.

`Doctor,' she began.

'Shh,Ace,' he said, looking at another box in his hands, this one crudely made from bark. Then he pocketed it, **and quickly checked the soldier lying unconscious at their feet.**

She knelt down, 'I had to do it. He was hurting her...'

`You did the right thing,Ace. He'll be all right, though none of this is his fault. He was as much a pawn as you were and I was:

A tempest of emotions swirled around her at his words, then, 'Mrs Harris,' she blurted.

'What about her?'

'After you left I went up to bed. Only I didn't...'

'Ace?'

'Mrs Harris went outside and killed a chicken. She killed it with one of those old-fashioned razor things. I left her when she was doing some crazy mumbo-jumbo.Then that box started singing to me: She trailed off, feeling silly.

'Ace, how did you get here so quickly?'

'I, ah. A car. I borrowed a car.'

'Come on, help me with this poor **lad.** We have to get back to Mrs **Harris's house before she can** do more **damage'**

'What damage? Doctor?!' But action demanded her attention and she **helped him with the soldier.**

The Doctor let Ace drive while he **looked after the young American. It wasn't the stone that had** knocked him **cold, he surmised. Oh, he'd have a** 100

mighty bump and bruising in a few hours, but it was obvious there was no serious damage. No, the poor chap was sleeping off what he had nearly done, but he would be fine after a good sleep.

The Doctor returned his attention to Ace as she swerved to overtake another car travelling at a much more respectable speed. Both horns blared at each other, but Ace held control and kept going along roads she oughtn't to know.

His hand touched the new box in his pocket and he felt the song and he understood how she knew where to go.

Ace skidded the car to a halt outside Mrs Harris's house just as Mei glided down the street on her bicycle. As Ace engaged the hand brake, the Doctor leapt from the car and arrived in front of Mei as she dismounted.

Ace looked back at the soldier, but he looked as though he was

peacefully sleeping. For a moment she wondered what the Doctor had done.'She looked over at him again, saw him with the enemy. They were both the enemy, she realised. She knew what she had to do.

Her quarry was moving to enter the house.

She moved to follow, her hand reaching into her pocket and feeling the familiar cylindrical shape of her nitro-9 canister.

Inside the house the light shone from the kitchen.The Doctor guided Mei through the corridor, following the light. He could see Mrs Harris busy at the kitchen table.

He felt Ace enter the house behind him. He was aware of her presence from the new box singing to him with no words.

Beside Mrs Harris he saw Ace's open haversack.

The song screamed as Ace did.

The Doctor turned around to stop Ace at exactly the same time as Mei launched herself forward to grapple with Mrs Harris.

The place exploded.

She felt like she had the first time she'd woken with a hangover. Her head pounded, and even through her closed eyes she could see the stabs of light she knew would murder her if she opened her eyes. Her mouth tasted of cotton wool, and there was a sharp pungent chemical smell wafting directly under her nose.

She wanted to throw up, but then suddenly her head cleared and she could open her eyes and she felt fine.

The Doctor was looking at her, concern in his eyes. 'Doctor? What happened?'

He glanced behind him, and Ace saw Mrs Harris through the open door talking with Mei.

`Mrs Harris was interfering with things she didn't understand. She was causing an imbalance in the hymnal skein. She meant well. She was trying to protect this city and its people overseas fighting in the war.'

`You what? What's a hymnal skein?' She said the words uncertainly.

`The hymnal skein is a force that holds all life together. It has its guardians, who are like immortals. Mei is one, the aboriginal girl we met is another.There are others in the world...'

Ace just looked at him with all the scepticism a teenager can muster against an adult. 'Not *the* Force?' she interrupted.

The Doctor looked puzzled at her reaction, then shook his head,`No, no, no, no, no, no.That's Hollywood taking from things they don't understand.'

Then he smiled as though a thought had caught him unawares. 'Then perhaps yes. As useful as any analogy. The Taoists call it the Way and they demonstrate its essential balance with the yin and yang symbol'

Ì remember there was an explosion,' she said, interrupting him again.

`Yes; he said. 'It wasn't the nitro-9 you weren't meant to be carrying.

That's safe now, by the way.' His expression scolded her the way a kindly uncle would. She smiled at him. 'It's exactly what young Corporal Allum felt when you hit him.'

She winced at his name 'How is he?'

`He's fine. Resting in his bed upstairs. He'll think he was mugged and lucky not to be in hospital.These parts are quite rough, so Mrs Harris tells me'

`But...'

He smiled again. Òh, Mei is explaining to Mrs Harris that while she can sense the skein, she does not have the understanding to manipulate it safely. No one does. Not even its guardians.'

Mrs Harris appeared from around the door. 'What a dreadful night, but they say on the wireless they destroyed all the Jap subs. Would you both like some tea?'

`Yes, Mrs Harris.Tea would be lovely.'

ERATO

The Muse of Love Poetry and Mimicry

Confabula

Ian Potter

Audrey

I do not know what poetical'** is. Is it honest in deed and word? Is **it a true thing?

Touchstone *No, truly, for the truest poetry is the most feigning; and lovers are given to poetry, and what they swear in poetry may be said as lovers they do feign.*

As You Like It

Act III, Scene iii

William Shaxsberd

It was a long journey from Thebsmake to Aedbra, so the literature said, and there wasn't even much to look at on the way - unless you liked wasteland, that was. Even the mutants that had grown up there weren't all that struck apparently. It was all rather dull and didn't even glow at night any more.

The Doctor sat in a grandiose train compartment, all oak panels, leather upholstery and cheap scent, reading at his leisure. Once he might have flipped through his magazine in a second and been on to the next, but things had changed. His latest incarnation's eyes were weaker than they'd once been, and he didn't feel he could guarantee he'd speed read accurately now. Besides, he was probably drawing enough attention for his strange garb without the need for any further ostentation.

He read slowly, letting his lips move and his finger trace the words beneath him, his long-sighted left eye on his surroundings, covertly glancing at the compartment's other two inhabitants, his short-sighted right on the page. To be a little short-sighted and know it was perhaps better than having perfect vision and ignorance, he told himself, and while making quick assessments and logical leaps were among his favourite pastimes, he no longer trusted himself to jump to conclusions as he once had. There'd been too many mistakes.

He wondered how Nyssa was getting on. He had a horrible feeling

that she might be going around telling the truth right now. Her upbringing had made it hard for her to understand the idea of situations in which honesty might not always be best.

He found her directness appealing, of course, it spoke to his own inner optimism, but it meant he worried for her awfully.

For all the horrors life with the Doctor had thrown at her, Nyssa just knew in her heart that goodness was the natural order of the Universe 105

and that evil was an aberration, an illness that kindness and love could cure.The Doctor wasn't quite so sure any more.

Some time ago, he remembered, a robot had told Nyssa that love was merely an exchange of fantasies. The idea had upset her, he knew. She'd often spoken of it since. It had been an alien idea that she couldn't bring herself to consider, but the Doctor had allowed himself to briefly entertain it, and let it entertain him, several times of late. What if the robot had been right? He had, after all, mapped love's chromosomal origins himself as a young Time Lord, and identified it as, at root, an elegant evolutionary con-trick that society reinforced to perpetuate life and build communities. What if that was all it was? He'd got a Gamma and a condescending smile off Borusa for that paper, he recalled. A neat piece of reductionism, if somewhat facetious,' his tutor had said, chuckling, 'but tell me, how could you not love a Universe that so sweetly seduces us to care for those within it?'

The Doctor became aware he was staring into space and one of the compartment's other occupants was watching him The pink, plump woman in a glittery purple blouse, on the other side of the carriage's big onyx table, was smiling at him. He broke her gaze and read on.

The wasteland outside was, it appeared, the result of the last but one purity war to end all others, and the use of some ultimate weapon or other (though it seemed no one could quite remember which one any more. There'd been a few and apparently it'd all been a bit of a muddle with regard to what was being used when against whom, back then.

When universities came back, the magazine article suggested, it would all end up a topic for scholarly debate).

Nowhere, so far, had the freesheet given the planet's name. It was, after all, the kind of thing most readers might be reasonably expected

to already know, the Doctor surmised, but he had a terrible suspicion it was F.arth.

ÒK, come out of there: said the man's voice.

Nyssa knew it could only be directed at her. She looked for somewhere to run, but of course there was nowhere. Once she broke cover there'd be only the two exits to the long carriage to run for, and neither was obligingly open any more. She'd done well to avoid the guards in these bushes for this long, she supposed, resigning herself to capture. She'd run through three carriages of vegetable patches before chancing on this berry-filled undergrowth.

`Who is it? Miss Kinloch-Jones?' someone else was asking, a girl.

`No, I don't think so,' the man's voice said. 'She's not due for a meet down here today.'

Another Humpty Princess you've got infatuated then, Guilliame?' said the girl teasingly.

`Leave it, Jennette; came a third voice, another man, slightly irritable sounding. 'You don't want another lecture on the dangers of derogatory language from the great author, do you?'

`Not without footnotes,' Nyssa thought she heard the girl mutter.

`Stand up slowly,' said the first man, now quite close by. 'We're armed.'

Nyssa pulled herself out of the shrubbery and faced her captors in the full glare of the carriage light.To her surprise, none of them wore the dark blue suits or caps of the police guards.

They were a sorry bunch, humanoid teenagers, little older than herself, ethnically diverse, and, to Nyssa's nose, undeniably from F.arth or one of its colonies. They had that same slight musk she'd come to know from Tegan and her people.

Guilliame - the first speaker - was a youth of average height, though being slightly chubby and stooped, he seemed shorter. His skin colour was like that of two Inuit brothers Nyssa had once met in Alaska, and his eyes, deep set in tired, puffy sockets.The girl, Jennette, was a foot or so shorter but, slimmer and less hunched, she seemed to fill the

space around her with more confidence. She had the yellowish complexion and thin dark eyes Nyssa recognised as Chinese in origin. The third youth, who stood warily behind them, was pale and fair like the Doctor.Tall and gangly with watery blue eyes, he seemed twitchy and nervous.

Given the pigmentary diversity their skins displayed, their ancestors must have come from areas with vastly different levels of ultraviolet light, Nyssa reasoned. This extreme environmental adaptation was one of the curios of F.arth people that still amazed her, for all Adric had once scoffed that it was nothing.

All three of the teenagers wore simple grey coveralls with starched blue collars, Guilliame's bore a red flash on the breast pocket; Jennette's, a green; the tall boy's, a yellow. Technically, they'd lied about being armed, but the gardening tools they held all looked like they could serve well enough as weapons if required.

Jennette's eyes flicked quickly over Nyssa's clothes. 'Definitely, a Hum-' she started, quickly correcting herself as Guilliame tensed beside her, - Highborn. No designation badge and check out the tailoring' She waved a shovel menacingly. `Do you know the penalty for scrumping on this train, Miss?' she asked sardonically.

Ì' m afraid not. I'm new here you see,' explained Nyssa, struggling to keep her voice in a calm, level register.

Òn this train, Miss, we execute scrumpers,' growled the tall boy, inexpertly toying with his rake while stepping forward, and, somewhat unfortunately, dropping it.

Òh class, Burdine, class,' said Jennette with a long-suffering expression.

Èver wondered why you failed your TP exams?'

Burdine scrabbled clumsily in the soil beneath him for his rake handle, his pale skin pinkening.This interrogation didn't seem to be going terribly well at all, Nyssa thought, deciding to give her questioners a hand.

I' m Nyssa,' she said, holding out her arm out stiffly the way the Doctor always did when greeting people. 'Of Traken: she added, as if that might help, ànd I wasn't stealing fruit you know.Just hiding.' She

tried a friendly smile. She felt something like one but shakier spread itself across her face and decided to stop.

Guilliame was looking at her oddly, and not just because of her inexplicably raised arm, she suspected.

`New here?' he frowned.

`Yes,' explained Nyssa, trying to look him in the eye instead of glancing at the vicious-looking secateurs in his hand. `The Doctor and I arrived in our craft about an hour ago. I can show it to you, if you like. It's back in that sort of connecting area down there.'

She pointed through the foliage to the door at the end of the carriage, as much as anything as an excuse to move her unshaken outstretched hand out of reach of Guilliame's blades.

À Flotilary Police ship?' said Jennette quietly.

Nyssa had no idea what she meant.

`Not exactly,' she began. 'It has the word "police" on the door but we're not really affiliated.You see the Doctor and I travel about trying to - '

'A doctor? Some kind of locum?' said Guilliame excitedly. 'A freemarketer, like the Skirmingers? No wonder the All Clear took so long!'

Ì don't know, I suppose so, yes,' said Nyssa, beginning to feel out of her depth, and struggling to keep a tremble from her throat. The Doctor's not from here, you see. He's a sort of investigator: he likes to find things out, put wrong things right: Keep it simple, she thought, try to tell it in terms they'll understand.

Jennette weighed Nyssa's words carefully. 'When you say "not from here"; she asked, 'do you mean from another line system or *abroad?'*

Here was the difficult one, thought Nyssa, the point where it left their frames of reference and they started to disbelieve.

`We're from Space,' she said as plainly as she could, not expecting to be taken seriously.

The three youths glanced at each other briefly

`Do you think the resistance messages have been picked up?' said Burdine eagerly.They believed her!

`Perhaps,' said Guilliame, all caution now, as if embarrassed by his earlier outburst of excitement. 'Go on, Nyssa?

'We found a dead man in one of those police uniforms in the corridor by the TARDIS, our ship. Just next to our arrival spot,' she explained. 'He'd been murdered, beaten to death - ' she shuddered involuntarily - 'and we 108

ended up getting split up when those alarms went off. It seemed the best way to avoid awkward questions.' Her explanation seemed strangely feeble to her as she gave it now - sketchy, ridiculous, lacking somehow.

She wasn't certain she'd have believed it herself.

`When you disabled all the pass-card doors, trying to get away, you mean?' Jennette asked.

`Well, yes, we didn't have tickets, you see. How did you know?' Nyssa replied.

A lucky guess,' Jennette answered brusquely.

'I ended up here and I think the Doctor said he was heading for first class,' Nyssa concluded.

`Rather than just return to your ship?' Burdine suggested, sceptically. He had a point.

It suddenly struck Nyssa just how odd it was that they hadn't run straight back into the TARDIS when the Doctor's safety-pin tinkerings with the key panel had set off that horrendous alarm sound. A panic reaction, she supposed, just like the Doctor suggesting they split up. Now she thought about it, she felt sure they'd have been safer together instead of dashing off in separate directions: he into the scent-heavy corridor that had opened up ahead of them, and she into these indoor gardens behind.

She couldn't help wondering whether he'd just suggested it because he'd caught wind of a mystery here, and wanted to get involved.

'Terribly unlucky place for a covert door docking, right next to a dead Transport Policeman, don't you think?' said Jennette.

`Yes, but we didn't kill him He was dead when we arrived,' explained Nyssa hurriedly.

Òh, we know that, Nyssa; smiled Burdine, gripping his rake tightly.

Nyssa felt a fresh wave of coldness pass through her. 'What's going on here?' she asked, hoping her voice didn't betray her fear.

`Class war,' said Guilliame, appearing to come to some decision. 'Come back to our sleeping compartment, we'll explain there - not safe here in the allotments, even with the noddy guards we get down here: He nodded Burdine towards the far door. The blond youth hesitated for a moment, then, pulling a piece of rectangular plastic from his coverall, walked to the door and swiped it with his card. It opened with a weary grinding noise, and he stepped through to the next carriage. Nyssa followed meekly with Guilliame and Jennette behind her. She didn't have much choice.

Glancing out of a window as they headed from the agricultural carriages into natural light, she saw a giant billboard in the mid-distance.

Two heroically idealised men were depicted on it. They were shooting babies in what looked like a hospital ward full of incubators while women behind looked on. To Nyssa's fleeting glance it almost looked as if the 109

women were gazing on adoringly, not weeping at the carnage. She decided not to **take** a second look.

According to the freesheet the Doctor **was reading, the Protectorate Collective had put up giant billboards at either side of the rail tracks back** in the forties to shield passengers from the full empty horror of the terrain they were passing through.

The boards, which had seen better days now, bore a simple cartoon love story from the old days: alpha male meets beta male, males meet herd, males attack herd, kill old leader, eat babies, inseminate females, and alpha and beta males live happily ever after together. They'd been cunningly constructed so the narrative worked both ways apparently, the heroes being young survivors of the attack on the reverse journey.That way, both heading to Thebsmake from Aedbra and going back you had an illusion of narrative.

The narrative was full of holes now and falling apart where the boards had been scavenged for shanty towns.

`Game of Perfidy?' the pink-faced lady opposite the Doctor asked,

indicating the six-sided game board that her companion, a blue-bearded man in an turquoise kaftan, had constructed from his computer tablet. 'We need a third hand:

Ì' m afraid I don't play,' said the Doctor, trying to return to his reading.

A corpulent hand in a shimmering purple sleeve came down on his magazine as if by accident, preventing him.

`You surprise me,' the lady said. 'You have the kind of guileless **face that one** only finds on the exceptionally cunning, here in business class.'

The Doctor grinned sheepishly and, seeing the lady's hand remained on his free magazine, turned to look out of the window at the long white desert and at the dark tale unfolding across it on distant, ragged posters.

`Leave him be, Emiliege,' said the woman's companion resignedly. 'We can have the computer play the turnabout.'

Òh, the computer's no good!' she protested, then turned to the Doctor to explain. `Too predictably sneaky, you see. Our daughter used to play, but she's going through one of those phases. Wants nothing to do with us these days; all mock-pleb fashion, ridiculous big lapels, glottal stops and tantrums about how unfair life is, lately.You know how it is'

The Doctor made no response, just continued scanning the ugly horizon and the uglier pictures on it, hoping his silence might end the discussion.

Òne of the long tunnels is coming up in a bit, you know. There'll be nothing to look out of the window at, bar your own reflection, when that happens,' Emiliege pressed on.

Àh, well then, perhaps I'll return to my reading when that happens,'

suggested the Doctor, without turning his head. He'd half hoped that he 110

might be able to quietly go to ground here in one of the first class compartments, and could glean some of the basics of the world he'd fallen into from his complimentary magazine before the guards came through.

The plan, such as it was, was not running all that smoothly.

I've not seen you before, have I?' the woman continued, her manner perhaps a little flirtatious now

`No: said the Doctor, in what he hoped was a voice full of finality.

F.miliege was having none of it. She leant forward across the table and winked. 'You're an Inspector aren't you?' she said. 'I can tell. Don't worry

- we shan't breathe a word. Undercover, I imagine.'

The Doctor turned slowly to face her. He was being offered a lifeline. If he could convince this pair he was some form of secret investigator they might just provide a cover for him when the guards arrived.As long as he could convince them the guards themselves might be under investigation, that was. It was never simple, was it?

Ì expect it's the suicides you're looking into,' F.miliege fished. `Was that what the alarm was about before?'

`He won't tell you anything, Emilieg e,' said the blue-bearded man beside her, sighing. Ìf he's an Inspector he'll be keeping it velced for pro reasons, and if he isn't, he'll keep it just as quiet, so he can enjoy you flirting with him a bit longer.'

F.miliege rolled her eyes. 'Ignore him. He's just tetchy because his market value slipped a point this morning.'

Òf course: said the Doctor, nodding, and smiled sympathetically

`Would you like to swap seats at all, actually?' F.miliege suddenly asked.

`You're facing backwards, which is horrid when you're looking out of the window. Mellin won't mind, he'll be looking at the game board.'

Merlin

didn't seem at all convinced.

Ì can't bear sitting looking backwards myself,' Emiliege continued. All the scenery goes the wrong way, doesn't it? I like to see what's coming up next, not what we've just passed. Don't you?'

The Doctor couldn't help thinking there was little scenery to miss but kept the observation to himself.

`You know, I don't really know: he said airily. Ì suppose I like to do both really. Sometimes I think it's good to look at how you got where you are, not just where you're heading:

Emiliege clapped her hands excitedly and beneath her purple glittery blouse the Doctor caught sight of a prodigious bosom heaving.

'A Philosopher Inspector!' she laughed joyously. 'It *is* the suicides, I knew it! Have you a theory, then?'

A theory?'

`For why all these Utility travellers have been jumping lately?' Emiliege explained obligingly.

The Doctor leant forward conspiratorially. 'Nothing positive as yet,' he whispered, 'only just arrived, you see.Tell me though, just out of curiosity; what stops you from jumping?'

Emiliege went pale for an instant, then, recovering herself with a giggle, whispered conspiratorially back. 'Well, the fact we're moving, for one,' she suggested. 'Fear of hitting the ground at speed, I suppose, and there's always what'd be waiting for you out there in the wasteland if you jumped and were unlucky enough to live, remember.'

The Doctor nodded encouragingly. 'Ah yes, but beyond that,' he said, feigning intense interest in her words. 'Those are the things that would stop you jumping if you'd opened the train door and were standing wavering on the brink. What stops you even going to the door to waver?'

For a second, Emiliege looked like she hadn't quite understood the question.A minute or so passed while she mulled it over.

'Well, common sense, really,' she said eventually, in a small voice, 'the things that keep all of us on the trains - the hope that one day it'll all get better again, you know.'

Ì see,' breathed the Doctor, rubbing his chin, ànd if common sense ever deserted you, just for a moment?' he asked gently:If for a split-second you got the feeling that you weren't really going anywhere, that your journey was meaningless, that things might never get better again? What would stop you then?'

`The TP guards with their big guns at the doors, I imagine!' laughed Emiliege.

`That's what I thought too,' said the Doctor, rewarding her with an approving grin and leaning back in his seat. 'Tell me about the guards here. How popular would you say they are?' he enquired casually.

The smell of the Utility carriages put Nyssa in mind of Mondas.A tang of over-boiled vegetables and resignation seemed to permeate everything as if it had got into the fabric of the whole train and tainted it all somehow, sapping even the people in it of enthusiasm and energy. No one they passed seemed to think it even slightly odd to see a young woman in clothes utterly unlike their own being escorted down the train corridor by three youths with garden tools.There was bound to be a reason, their briefly curious faces seemed to say, but whatever it might be, it was none of their business. Their initiative had been drained

Three young girls in the same shoes, clothes and hairdos, but otherwise utterly unidentical, ran past laughing - a brief flurry of life and excitement in the oatmeal gloom, one stocky, one willowy, one bespectacled.Their jackets were caricatured versions of the train guards'

uniforms, Nyssa noted with surprise. Crudely dyed blue tops with giant epaulettes and lapels, encrusted in outsize brass buttons. That was what 112

the adults here were lacking, she thought, as she saw them disappear into the next carriage - a little youthful challenge to authority Perhaps the smell of cabbage hadn't sunk into their young bones yet.

Watching the mismatched girls' retreating backs, Nyssa was briefly reminded of friends from home: Lissaea and Urtalis and how they'd run with her long ago in Traken's groves, playing Fosters and Lime Wasps or Musical Melkurs. It was always the same with girlfriends, she thought to herself - the pretty one, the sporty one and the clever one, inseparable.

She knew she'd always longed to be as pretty as Lissaea, or as agile as Urtalis, and suspected they'd wished themselves her equal in their lessons. She wondered if it was the same for those three train girls - each defining herself in relation to the others by the traits each felt she lacked.

Burdine stopped by one of the scores of grey doors in the corridor. 'In

here,' he said, opening it up with his card key, then ushering Nyssa through.

Beyond it was a small dingy room. Two pairs of narrow bunk beds flanked the walls, and an old cracked sink nestled behind the door. At the far wall was a small, fogged window through which the wilderness beyond was mercifully invisible. Grey washing hung steaming from a clothes-line overhead, above a small electric heater that looked like it might also serve as a stove.

`Mon repos,' said Burdine grimly, as Nyssa's trio of escorts trooped in behind her.

'Chez nous, you mean,' said a huddled bunch of blankets from one of the upper bunks.

An old man looked down: wiry framed; his hair, a short fleece of tight white curls; his skin, a deep black-brown.

`What kept you?' he snapped. 'When I heard the TP Max go, I thought you'd got yourselves caught.' Behind the scolding tone Nyssa could detect genuine relief to see them.

`What? Tending the veg?' laughed Jennette. 'We got stuck in the garden carriages in the aftermath of a security incident, she explained. 'Had to wait about for all the doors to re-ac'

`That's what you tell me,' the old man said, hopping nimbly down from his bunk He wore only a string vest and pair of mustard yellow shorts. For all I know you could've been having a secret meet with the troubledoers:

`That's a Humpty-name for the Troubadours, Dad,' said Guilliame pedantically. 'Using their slang just breeds false consciousness'

`F.r, you mean "Highborn" don't you, Guill?' Burdine corrected.

Jennette laughed derisively. "'False consciousness"!' she snorted. 'What kind of daft F.ngelist jargon's that, book-boy?'

Guilliame had no answer. Nyssa dimly recalled the phrase. She'd heard it on Earth at that party in Hebdon Bridge the Doctor had taken her to. It 113

was something to do with oppressed people being tricked into holding their oppressors' ideas. A young man there who smoked nasty little

cigarettes and talked about the Struggle all the time had used the term a great deal before telling her she was a tourist and passing out, she remembered. Guilliame reminded her of him a little, now she thought of it.

The dark-skinned old man came over to her and stared. Who's your friend?' he asked the others.

' My name's Nyssa,' she said simply. 'I was part of the security incident.

Nyssa's captors turned to face her. They'd almost completely forgotten her, it appeared.

'She's an Off-worlder. We think she's here to help,' Jennette added.

'Charmed,' said the old man, slowly looking Nyssa over. 'I'm Mr Villeharduin,' he announced. 'Tea?'

The train-city was in decline, Emiliege explained. Even without the suicides the Transport Police had it tough.There were continual attempts to seize control of the kitchen carriages by Utility commuters, and illegal bids to emigrate into first class by Blue Collars to contend with. It was as much as the guards could do to control them. Morale was low and civil disobedience was only increasing, she confidentially revealed.

Mendicant troubadours were starting to ally with redistributionists in the Utility coaches, singing tales of Green Hob and his woodmen to the hoi polloi, polluting passenger minds with talk of revolt. One singer had even briefly seized control of part of the intercom network and broadcast a song to eight whole carriages a month back. The Operating Company had been forced to authorise a cull in the end.

In the light of the unrest, constant police scrutiny was being imposed on the writer carriages now, where the scribes penned and pressed the fat novels and throwaway newspapers and magazines the travellers needed for their journey. Police copy-editors were being stationed in every print room and his diversion into copy editing was seriously draining guard resources, she confided. This proofreading was vital though. If one incendiary sentence accidentally slipped through in those mounds of newsprint, there could easily be another class riot or unlicensed breeding frenzy to quell, like on the Carisaille line in '56.

The Doctor nodded:And is anything being done to help calm the Utility workers?'

'Oh as much as we can,' Mellin suddenly piped up. 'The Skirminger squads bring in reclaimed food and drink and new fuels and fashions as often as they can, and that quietens everything down for a bit as things slip down the classes, but if we have a lean period or the Flotilaries fail to stop the mutants track sabbing, we get unrest, I'm afraid. Been like this for 114

years, of course, but until we can retake the real cities, there's no real alternative, is there?'

The Doctor sighed and gazed out of the window. If this was Earth, he thought, one of the unthinkably dreadful things that were always threatening to go wrong there finally had. The world was dying, and not decorously in bed, either. These nomads commuting ceaselessly through ashen wastes on ancient trains represented the last vestiges of millennia of civilisation. Beset by savage mutants, their twilight existence maintained only by mercenary scavengers looting burnt-out relics of better days, these desperate survivors were clinging on to a parody of an old order in the hope the world might Me day be theirs again. It didn't seem likely, and, all the while, their minds were being corrupted by the warped vision of life in those monstrous billboards outside and whatever fictions the writer carriages churned out too, no doubt - being fed on a poisoned

version of the truth, that might well be helping them stay alive, but at who knew what cost.

It seemed, as humanity eked out its last days under glass, that the barbarism that had always lurked in the species' heart had finally won through.

The Doctor glimpsed his face reflected in the window glass, as he stared out into the dust. Just for an instant, it looked wrong - an arch-browed, thin-lipped face with an aquiline nose blinked back at him, its long swept-back hair grey at the temples. It was a face he hadn't worn for centuries, the face he still thought was his when his attention was down.

The face vanished from the glass as quickly as it had appeared, as if seeking to deny it'd ever been present at all. A smooth-featured, blond-framed one, the one the Doctor wore now, stared back in its stead.

'I didn't imagine that just now, did I?' the Doctor said to his companions. Their expressions were blank. My reflection? **Did** you

see?'

Nothing. 'What's happening here?' he asked.

He stood up hesitantly; the floor suddenly seemed to be bucking beneath his feet harder than the movement of the train might explain, as if time and space were rippling around him Everything seemed unreal, distant.

`What's wrong?' Emiliege and Mellin were looking at the Doctor in concern.

Àre you alright?' Mellin asked. They seemed tiny, doll-like. Then they were plunged into darkness as the carriage entered a tunnel.

Slowly and ramblingly, over tea brewed on the little heater, the old man, Villeharduin, explained the train's culture to Nyssa.

There were four classes of passenger she gathered: Workers **and Blue Collars (the Utility** classes), and the Enforcers and Humpties.

The Workers did all the essential labour, the vital day-to-day jobs: 115

maintaining the train's motive units and power plants, cleaning the toilets, making the food for the restaurant cars and so forth.The Blue Collars did the work that required more planning: teaching the children, entertaining the masses, supervising the breeding programme, and running the hospital and the chapel cars. Villeharduin went on at some length about the difficulties of their tasks. The enforcers, probably the largest group, were the Transport Police guards employed by the train's operating company. F.ven though they policed everything on board the city, they themselves were subject to a higher police force - the Flotiliaries, a powerful body run by the Protectorate Collective, who arbitrated between the rival operating companies, and oversaw the skirminging raids and track security in their fleets of flying craft.

`Who are the Humpties, then?' Nyssa asked, gingerly sipping the strong stewed brew she'd been given, `The Highborns? What do they do?'

`Horizontally Mobile Professional Travellers: Burdine answered, from one of the lower bunks 'They don't *do* anything. They're the future.

They're kept in place for if we ever get off here.'

`They're descended from the old business travellers who had skills that made them valued commodities,' Jennette went on:Their ancestors spent more of their time being head-hunted and relocated than they did actually working, it's just an extension of that.They're supposedly going to run the world if it ever becomes anything worth running again.'

Nyssa looked puzzled.

`They're administrators: said Villeharduin. The theory is they'll be needed one day. Until then, the train operating companies are always bidding to buy them from each other. Worth millions of currency units a head, good Humpties, they live off the interest in them. F.veryone wants good people on their side if their train ends up being selected to recivilise somewhere, you see:

`So you're Blue Collars?' Nyssa checked.

`That's right,' explained Guilliame, 'I work in one of the writers'

carriages', he said with ill-disguised pride, 'on the word searches and crosswords mainly. My sister, Jen here's a functionary in the nursery carriages, works on the breeding programme, monitoring purity, maintaining the class ratios, managing diversity and that, and *we* think Burdine's going to be a teacher, when he gets on track -'

`Failed his guard exams, see?' said Jennette. 'Totally derailed up our best infiltration opportunity, he did:

`Thank you, Jen. Give your brother a break,' said Villeharduin firmly.

Jennette rolled her eyes. 'Sorry, dad,' she said, with an air of practised contrition.

I'm a chapelman myself,' he added. 'Oh, and part-time revolutionary, obviously?

`You're their father?' Nyssa asked, looking to the three young people around them.

'Oh yes,' the old man grinned, 'mainly.'

`But the genetic differences - ' Nyssa began.

`That's what we have a breeding programme for;Villeharduin

explained.

`Limited blood pool on here, diversity's essential. No point having genetic engineers on board if we're going to have everything unregulated, is there? Besides, family's about more than just genes, you know.'

Nyssa suddenly felt very foolish,Àre you all revolutionaries?' she asked, hoping to change the subject.

'Oh yeah.' Guilliame nodded.

'We need a hobby after all, us oppressed,' said Jennette. 'Gives us something to look forward to.

`We're part of Sleepers Rise; Burdine said kindly. 'One of the resistance groups who want to overturn the Highbirth system. I imagine it was one of our network's distress calls to the lost colonies you picked up in Space.'

Nyssa realised she hadn't disabused her captors of the notion that she'd been sent to aid them:On my own world you might call me a Highborn; said Nyssa carefully as the Utility carriages rumbled into a tunnel.

Artificial lights flicked on in the Doctor's compartment, reacting to the tunnel's darkness.

Almost immediately, something stirred outside. A lean, white creature with a pale screaming face leaped forward from the tunnel wall, propelling itself at the train.

It seemed translucent, almost ethereal. Long diaphanous fronds of what might have once been clothes or hair, or might almost be tentacles billowed about it, as it clung to the window. Mellin and Emiliege scrambled from their seats in panic, as, gripping the glass with its huge webbed feet and hands, the creature pressed giant grey eyes against the window-pane to see within. It grinned manically, revealing long yellow teeth, as it spied prey inside, revealing long yellow teeth. Great sticky strands of saliva exuded from its mouth, flapping like long flags in the rushing tunnel air.

The Doctor looked on, impassive, as the beast brought its monstrous head back slowly, and then abruptly forward with a jerk.

'Get down!' yelled Mellin.

The safety glass shattered, and a roar of wind that might have been clawing spectral fingers or just a rush of cold outside air tore through the compartment.

The temperature dropped rapidly as the warm, scent-heavy atmosphere spilled out into the dark. Mellin hit the compartment's alarm button and began to sidle slowly towards the door.

`What is it?' the Doctor shouted over the noise of the wind, as the creature's long fingers and toes slowly enlarged the hole it had made in the window, and shards of glass blew about the compartment.

À 'Funnel Wraith!' screamed Emiliege. 'Must have latched on to your psyche, tried to siren-call you out with some kind of hallucination. They do that to acute minds'

The Doctor raised an eyebrow in surprise. 'Really?' he said.

Emiliege grabbed him by the arm and tried to pull him back towards the compartment door. 'Come on,' she said urgently. 'It'll be inside in a moment.'The Doctor didn't budge. Gently prising her hand from his arm, he just stood stock-still, gazing at the apparition before him. 'Back away slowly,' Emiliege prompted. 'Any sudden moves, it might strike'

Still, he did nothing. 'Please,' she begged, tugging at the Doctor's coat.

`Come on! It's trying to hypnotise you. We need to get you out of here!'

The Doctor still didn't move. He was watching the spindly creature slowly pull itself into the compartment, clambering inside like some giant albino spider, with an expression of some amusement on his face.

`This wraith - it's some kind of mutant, is it?' he said.

`You don't know?' Emiliege replied, incredulous.

`No,' said the Doctor, beaming, enjoying the feeling of the wind in his hair, 'Curiously, no one's ever mentioned them to me before. Peculiar that, don't you think?' He gave Emiliege and Mellin a quizzical stare.

Mellin was backing quickly towards the compartment door now, all

composure gone. 'You must know about them!' he garbled. 'F.veryone does!' There's even a report in your freesheet about how they're on the increase'

'Is there now?' said the Doctor beatifically.

As if on cue, a clump of pages from the magazine flapped noisily by, caught up in an eddy of the wind.The Doctor plucked it from the air one-handed, without taking his eyes from the wraith, and of course there it was, on a page he hadn't yet read: *' Wraith activity spreading. Psionic attacks worsening:There* was some speculation further down the page that recent mystery train deaths may be down to a new wraith breed they were calling Doppelgangers because of their hunting method.They lured you out of the trains with a ghostly image of yourself, apparently.

`How awfully convenient,' the Doctor said drily, letting the pages drop and stepping forward to face the beast framed in the window.

Emiliege gripped the Doctor's waist and pulled him back forcibly. 'Arc you mad, Doctor?' she hissed.

`Very probably, all things considered,' he said, eyeing her curiously. Ì do seem to spend a lot of time talking to myself, as it happens'

`Who are you?' she said suddenly. 'You're more than just an Inspector, aren't you? What's this all about?' she asked, looking utterly bewildered now.

`You know, I've very little idea,' he replied. 'What's your guess?'

`The Transport Police'll be coming for that wraith!' Mellin bellowed from the door. 'Quick! We've got to get you to our living quarters.You've got to hide from them!'

Àre you sure?' the Doctor yelled back. 'I am an Inspector after all, aren't I?'

`No you're not!' Mellin snapped, suddenly sounding more exasperated than scared. 'You're clearly an impostor!'

The Doctor turned his back on the Wraith. 'Really, Mellin? Why not just give me up then? Why offer to hide me?' he inquired.

`Because you interest me, and because they'll kill you if they find you,'

Emiliege pleaded.

Òh, I rather doubt that, you know,' said the Doctor, ruffling Emiliege's hair. 'I expect the worst they'll do is tie me up, torture me a bit, ask for answers to questions I can't give and then refuse to believe me when I tell the truth'

The wraith finally clambered in behind him, depositing itself on the onyx table with an awful thud and emitting a terrible screech of triumph.

Mellin and Emiliege flinched as it trampled the Perfidy board underfoot.

Ì imagine I'll make flip remarks back,' the Doctor went on, 'belying the severity of my suffering, before winning over one nervous young recruit who'll fight my corner with his superiors. You see, this is all rather formulaic stuff.'

`What are you on about, Doctor?' Mellin screamed from the door as the wraith leaped from the table and lunged towards the Doctor.

Ì don't know, Mellin. I'm making it all up as I go along.' The Doctor grinned, knocking the wraith casually to one side with a swinging arm.

Ànd I rather suspect someone else is too. Goodbye.'

He jumped up on to the table and leaped out of the window into the void.

Ìt was going to be such a good story for us too,' said a female voice disappointedly. Ì thought you'd enjoy it, if I dressed up as a dystopia, you see'

The Doctor was in an elegantly furnished, cool blue room, somewhat disorientated. It was furnished after the fashion of an eighteenth-century aristocrat's drawing-room, and, from the look of it, furnished from his memories too. Everything was worryingly familiar, exactly right. Real life was never like that, there were always details that surprised you. This room had been constructed to exactly fit his expectations. Its perfection was faintly troubling.

Ì'm afraid I messed things up a bit giving you the wrong face, didn't I?'

the voice continued. 'My attention dropped. I hoped shoehorning the

wraith in might mean I got away with it, give a sort of explanation, but of course I let them know your name by accident then, didn't I? Getting sloppy in my dotage, I think. Besides who would be attracted out of a window by their ghostly double? Anyone but the most ghastly narcissist would run a mile.'

`Sorry to disappoint,' the Doctor said warily, not at all sure what to make of his dismebodied hostess.

The voice giggled musically. 'No, that's my fault. I messed up. Out of practise. I thought perhaps you could turn me, you see; rescue me, solve my mystery, get tied up, escape - all that stuff you like,' she added, extruding a conversational body from her walls. She was the whole room!

`Those might be things I do sometimes. It doesn't necessarily mean they're the things I *like* doing,' the Doctor protested in puzzlement as the freshly formed figure extricated its heels from the wallpaper.

The new arrival was tall, olive skinned and infuriatingly beautiful. Her eyes were jet black, her smile unreadable.

Her dress, a deep red, bias-cut silk concoction seemed almost to have been spun around her, perhaps by obliging silk worms who'd thought she was entirely made of mulberries and had devoted themselves accordingly.

`Whatever you say,' she said knowingly, raising one perfect eyebrow.

`They're certainly not things I like to pretend I'm doing,' said the Doctor indignantly.

Ì could easily make it so you didn't know you were pretending if you liked...' the woman said, toying with a thin golden bracelet at her wrist. `So you thought you were making a difference as usual'

`Who are you?' the Doctor asked, his patience beginning to wear thin.

`You may call me Maya if you like,' she said, somehow twisting her bracelet into a sphere of criss-crossed threads, each intersected by a jewel. Light from somewhere mysteriously within the threads lit up Maya's form for a second, sending thin tendrils of glowing sunshine coursing over her.

` May I now?' the Doctor said.

Maya's face lit up. The Doctor suddenly became very aware he was alone with this woman 'What have you done with Nyssa?' he demanded angrily.

Villeharduin lit a candle and hung it in a lantern from his clothes-line.`Bit of a long one, this tunnel, I'm afraid,' he said.

As her eyes grew accustomed to the gloom and she watched the old man go about his candle lighting, it occurred to Nyssa how very like her father Villeharduin was. Not in his appearance, of course, but in his manner. There was something about the way he moved, held his head, caught your eye, that seemed instantly familiar and reassuring. It was a 120

comforting feeling somehow - glimpsing a shadow of her father's character expressed in another's body like this. Quite the opposite feeling to that of first setting eyes on the Master - seeing him operating her father's cadaver from within, moving it wrongly, like a malign puppeteer.

`We're not against the Highborns themselves, Nyssa,' Guilliame reassured her eagerly.'We have Highborns working for Sleepers Rise even.

Highborns who believe their privileged upbringing is wrong. My F.ugenie,'

he went on, 'Miss Kinloch-Jones that is, is a Highborn, and she supports the cause'

`Largely because she's his lady love' Burdine sniggered from his bunk.

Even by candlelight, Nyssa could see Guilliame flush slightly.

`The main plus in my job is I have access to the presses, you see,' he explained. 'I can print up fake all-carriage passes, and slip messages into the dailies if no one's looking. Miss Kinloch-Jones and I first met while I was up in Business on a fake pass' His eyes became dreamy. 'Neither of us had met anyone quite like each other before, our classes don't really couple up and we... Well, we began to court.

Ì used to send Eugenie concealed love messages and venues for assignations hidden in the word searches and crossword clues, and we'd meet secretly, against her parents wishes. Over time, as our love

grew, she grew to understand our plight. Now we use the system I developed for our love notes to send messages to other Sleeper cells. The Transport Police are clueless, even the blue pencils!'

`Ms Kinloch-Jones has contacts,' Jenrette went on, 'She's certain that other Highborns will side with her in time. Our only problem is getting our train's Transport Police to support us when that time comes. If they're not with us when we take over, we won't be able to declare Company Independence. Any social reorganisation we impose on this train'll be wiped clean by the Operating Company. They'll send in fresh Company Police to cull us'

`You can't know that, surely?' said Nyssa.

'We do, I'm afraid. We lost one of our finest balladeers to a Company cull, a while back,' said Villeharduin. 'They're ruthless. Unless we're totally united, we won't get the Protectorate Collective to recognise us and give us Flotilary support against the Company.'

Nyssa thought for a second before speaking.

`Killing your Company's policemen probably isn't the best way to get them on your side then, is it?' she said.

`That wasn't anyone from Sleepers Rise!' protested Burdine, sitting up in his bunk sharply and banging his head on the one above.

'We don't think,' added Guilliame, more carefully. The guards are always fighting amongst themselves, we think it might have been an internal killing'

Nyssa frowned.

`There's talk of a team of FP investigators coming in to supervise our lot, trying to improve their handling of the uprisings, that always results in a bit of an increase in conflict,' Guilliame said:That killing was probably part of an attempt to cover something up. Bureaucracy the size of the TP

is always going to have some corruption.'

He paused for a second then added, 'Might be connected with all these fishy suicides we've had of late, I suppose'

The Doctor stared outraged at the projection of Nyssa that Maya was weaving in the air before him.

`That's obscene!' he protested. 'You're just manipulating her, trying to hook her into your fiction'

Òf course. That's the point,' explained Maya. 'All the language and images are pulled from your unconscious minds They're designed to make you want to know more - to string you along while I work out what they mean, and what they might mean to you, of course'

Ìt's a low trick to play on a scientist like Nyssa,' the Doctor said, 'giving her the illusion of slowly getting at the truth. She's trying to make sense of her surroundings in there, and all you're doing is stringing her along, tantalising her with suggestive details to draw her into your story.'

Ànd what else do you do to involve your companions, Doctor?' Maya asked reproachfully. She concertina-ed the spinning ball of light projecting Nyssa into a coil of jewelled gold and slipped it back on her arm.

-

Let's explore just a little longer, - she said, mimicking the Doctor rather too closely for his comfort. "Ì've a strange feeling there's something very wrong here.'"

The Doctor pretended not to recognise the impression.

"That derelict hulk is our only chance of locating Macguffinol for the TARDIS's chronoflux capacitor within parsecs,'" she went on, "We have to explore.'"

The impression was somewhat better. She'd caught the slightly exasperated tone Tegan had always managed to elicit from him, uncannily.

The Doctor smiled wanly despite himself.

"Come on, I'll explain later, - Maya added before letting her true voice return. 'We have to draw them in somehow, don't we?' She shrugged.

`The difference is I'm drawing them into a real world, not some warped fiction!' the Doctor replied as calmly as he could manage. Maya didn't answer, just started toying with her bracelet again,

glancing at the Doctor with ill-concealed amusement.

`What are you, Maya?' he said in exasperation. 'How long have I been here, being fed your trite illusions?'

`You don't know?' Maya sighed, sounding disappointed. 'How long has your life felt trite for?'

The Doctor's eyes flashed wildly.

Òh very well,' said Maya yawned, pulling her bracelet back into a sphere and spinning it on a finger. You and Nyssa arrived on a world you didn't know, a while back. Remember? The one with the implausibly pink-and-grey sky? You explored an old building underground, that you couldn't fathom the point of. That world was this one, me' In the depths of her spinning bracelet, the Doctor could glimpse the scene.

`You had a feeling you'd been there before,' Maya continued. 'You found a plaque commemorating something you didn't remember doing and decided it was best you left. You told Nyssa finding out what you'd done before you did it would rather take the fun out of doing it, and then off you went in your time machine.A little while later you arrived on the train from Thebsmake to Aedbra'

The 'boctor nodded, watching himself and Nyssa dematerialise the TARDIS.

`From that vague feeling of deja vu on, I was making it all up.You never left me' The image on the spinning gold ball seemed to peel away, revealing Nyssa and the Doctor looking dazed and vacant behind it, glittering mechanical flies buzzing about their heads.

The Doctor was horrified. 'How did you take control of my mind?' he asked quietly.

`You gave it to me,' Maya said flatly, pointing at the sphere in her hand.

The images of the Doctor and Nyssa swam forwards. Some of the flies that swarmed about them were crawling over their scalps, dropping tiny trochars into their skin. Some kind of probes, the Doctor guessed.

`Did I, now?'

Òh yes.You're more open than you might imagine, you know,' she said.

`You gave yourself to my mystery. Unconsciously, of course, but unconditionally nevertheless. You embraced it, and I embraced yours in return'

Ì see,' said the Doctor, gazing at the glinting image before him. 'Might I ask why?'

Ìt's what I do,' Maya explained, I'm a Psionosphere:

`Very nice. Should that mean something to me at all?'The Doctor asked blithely, trying to mask his concern. He'd been in a mind-reading entity's grasp for at least two days without knowing, and it seemed even this room, that he'd taken to be reality, was an illusion it had devised. 'Have you heard of the Makers?' Maya asked.

Òh I expect so. Do they have another name at all?' the Doctor enquired.

`They called themselves "Us"'

Ah, narrows the field down slightly, I suppose,' said the Doctor.

`We Psionospheres are planetary computers the Makers constructed many centuries ago,' Maya explained.

Ì see,' said the Doctor. 'Any particular reason at all?

"We were made to bring people together, to create consensual realities in which their minds could interconnect,' Maya said, `to invent scenarios for visitors to react to and that would react to them, scenarios they would live in'

The Doctor nodded to the sphere on Maya's fingertip. 'No "show and tell" this time?' he chided mockingly.

Images of cosmic construction formed on the surface of the ball.

Planets congealing in the void, being given shape as great shoals of crafts flew over their surface. Though the scale was hard to judge, this was presumably a feat of some magnitude. *Not actual size or speed,* a disclaimer announced at the bottom of the image. Maya was overhearing his thoughts and letting him know the fact in a way she

hoped would amuse him, the Doctor realised. Could she tell how troubled this made him? She already knew about the TARDIS it seemed. How much else might she have discovered that could prove dangerous?

The image on the globe zoomed cinematically down through swirling clouds to the surface of one of the planets.Tiny hominids stood in massed ranks across one of the continents, phalanx upon phalanx of them intersected by a grid of grey roadways.The picture swept over their blank faces, each crawling with metal flies. Many of them were covered with tubes. The Doctor found himself simultaneously repulsed by the image and reminded of Milton Keynes.

Òh it wasn't that bad!' said Maya. 'That's just how it looks to people who weren't involved'

She winked, and rather showily the image on the ball spiralled into the eye of one of the flyblown army, then burst out of the pupil's darkness into the world within, a strange realm of incredible architecture and impossible beings swarming with exotic vehicles. At first it seemed chaotic, but as the Doctor watched he gained the impression there was some intricate order behind it all, choreographing the seemingly random bustle in some dance he didn't know.

`We'd create whole worlds, languages, characters and cultures from the minds of our visitors,' said Maya, 'giving them what they needed to be content and allowing them to play out the battles they were avoiding within themselves safely in our dreamscapes, leading them gently to better lives.

`Slowly, through my guidance, the participants would come to comprehend other beings; truly understand the Other,' she explained, as her spinning bracelet depicted joyous faces waking laughing to a rather obviously symbolic new dawn on the Psionosphere's surface.

Èventually, everyone who interacted within me would be changed by their involvement with my changing environments. They'd become part of Us and my shared illusions could be allowed to gradually slip away into shared reality.

`Feuding tribes, families that did not talk, leaders of planets at war - all came to me,' she said proudly, as the image at her fingertip retreated from embracing visitors, giving the impression of a planetary

love-in, 'to learn and be healed, through experience and pleasure.'

All sounds very altruistic,' the Doctor said. `You'll forgive me for perhaps being suspicious?'

`Why? What other reason could the Makers have for creating me?' asked Maya curiously.

`Cultural colonialism? The Makers remaking everyone else in their own image, perhaps?' the Doctor hazarded.

Maya appeared to give it serious thought. 'Perhaps,' she replied, 'or perhaps helping the races of the Universe come to love each other and themselves. I would rather believe the latter.'

Ànd where are the Makers now, I wonder?' the Doctor asked breezily.

Maya didn't answer at first, her bottomless black eyes looking deep into the Doctor's. 'I don't know,' she said finally. 'It has been a long time since I last knew of them.There was, I believe, a war.'

`Probably between them and some people who didn't want to be part of their Us,' the Doctor suggested archly.

Ìt is possible,' Maya admitted, holding the Doctor's gaze.

`So, I presume that little show you whipped up for me was something you pulled from deep in my mind, was it?' he prompted, eager to discover I the extent of her powers. 'Half Flying Scotsman, half Flying Dutchman, always moving, never arriving, is that the kind of thing I'd make up? I always thought I dreamed of spanners.'

`The images came from the surface of your mind and Nyssa's, Doctor,' said Maya. 'For me to read more would require greater intimacy between us'

And probably a scalpel, the Doctor thought.

Ìndeed,' Maya answered aloud, 'but surface reading was enough to give you both what you want and need, a mystery to solve that would bring you pleasure in its solving, a just cause for you to espouse, a world and a family for Nyssa to save as she could not save her own, and a chance for you both to question your beliefs and discover and strengthen the true bond between you'

`Through manipulation? Discovering our true bond through living a

lie?' The Doctor didn't bother to disguise his scepticism. *Just the surface though* he thought, as deep inside him as he could.There was still a hope that Maya had learned nothing that she or her Makers should not know.

`Yes'

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'If you can read even the surface of my mind you'll know I refuse to stand for that, Maya,' he replied.

`Yes; she admitted forlornly. 'I'd hoped you would not discover the illusion.'

Ànd that would have made it all right, would it?' the Doctor enquired pointedly. If I'd remained ignorant of your deception?'

`Perhaps,' Maya said, twisting her jewelled sphere abstractedly into a figure of eight, then flipping its convex top and bottom inwards to form an hourglass shape.

Ì have to demand you release Nyssa at once, Maya,' the Doctor said, his voice surprising him by suddenly rising to a shout as he did so. Why was he so angry, he wondered? Was it because, for once, it was him being manipulated by some playful alien? Him who was out of his depth? It wasn't a pleasant feeling at all, no wonder all those bureaucrats and pen-pushers never took to him when he barged into their worlds and upended them.

Maya let the Doctor's protest echo off her walls a few times before replying. 'Doctor,' she began gently, 'I have been alone a long time. I've been a very long time without purpose. Like you and Nyssa, I long for a sense of completeness. What harm would it do to allow me to help you for a little while? What harm could come from stepping back into the dream I've made for you, to please me?'

Òh, none whatsoever, bar the possibility of never knowing what was real again and of course being slowly turned into someone else who wouldn't object to being remade, against my will,' the Doctor replied.

À small price to pay for happiness though, surely?' Maya suggested reasonably. 'We three could give each other all we need. We all want to help others. Why not help ourselves as we do so? I'm prepared to change too, you know.'

The Doctor said nothing. With a sinking feeling in his stomach he realised Maya was not just capricious but quite mad too. Was it a war that caused the Makers to abandon her, he wondered, or her own instability?

Maya pressed on. let me be frank, Doctor. You are a complicated man, more complicated than some nations I've woven illusions for. You fascinate me.You're a mystery like the ones you're so keen to solve around you, even I believe to yourself. I want to know you, unravel your mystery as you unravel mine I want us to become one.

Ùs, Doctor. Us.' She ran one of her perfect fmgers down his chin.To the Doctor's alarm, he realised she had flawlessly synthesised the feel of warm dry flesh he liked best. He stepped back, recoiling slightly from the creepy perfection of her touch. He was tempted, he realised in horror, seriously tempted.

'It would be a marriage of minds, of cultures, a marriage in every sense 126

you might desire,' Maya continued, her every cadence alluring, her manner beguiling, as she poured elegantly towards him like a cat. You and I could learn so much from each other, from Nyssa too, I'm sure, each becoming more than we ever were apart, more than we ever knew, more than the Makers ever dreamed. I could solve you, Doctor, set you free.'

The Doctor was uncertain what to do. It would be so easy to yield, Maya could offer him everything he'd ever dreamed of, and yet he was scared.

Could the perfect happiness she offered be genuine, or was she simply skimming his mind's surface for the things he wanted to hear? How could he trust her? Would everything he'd ever dreamed of be good enough if it was all an illusion?

He backed away. He had no bargaining chips to offer, no handy escape routes to hand. The best he could hope to do now was reason with his would-be suitor. With nothing to lose, he elected for bald confrontation.

`Maya? Has it ever occurred to you that you might have gone mad in your isolation at all?' he said eventually.

`Has it occurred to *you* that I might have fallen in love?' she replied.`Let me know you fully, let me help you know yourself fully.'

He felt her breath on him, it smelled like a night a thousand years ago that he thought he'd forgotten.

`You have memories of things that haven't happened yet - did you know that? I sense them on the surface of your mind.'

Òne of my curses, I fear,' said the Doctor, stepping nimbly away, `the odd presentiment drifting back down the old synapses, volcanoes, assassinations, the occasional impulse to duck just before a laser zaps one, that sort of thing.'

Maya was moving forward to kiss him, lips parted. Given the exquisite nature of her touch, the Doctor was reluctant to let himself feel the pleasures that might hold; it might enslave him He stumbled backwards, gabbling quickly, tripping over a chaise longue and scrambling away. All strictly paradoxical of course, but since I owe my life to a ghost of my future self I can't really moan, and it is terribly handy with the lasers.You can't out-run the things, you know.'

`No, there is more to it than that, Doctor,' Maya said as she stalked him, elegantly side-stepping the Louis Quinze furniture he placed between them. 'There's something special about you, something you fear and hide even from yourself. You have created blanks in your past to repel even your own investigation; I could help ease the fear. Drop your defences, Doctor, let me enter. I can make you complete, give you yourself back, Doctor; I know you feel it too.'

'Er, not today, thanks awfully!' the Doctor yelped, rummaging in his pockets for dei ex machinas and despairing at their inadequacy.There was certainly nothing in them for use against love-smitten planets bent on 127

brain surgery, not unless he could lash something together out of fluff and an elastic band, of course. He backed up against a wall, searching vainly for a safe place to go.

More of Maya extruded from it to embrace him from behind.

`Let down your guard, Doctor.Those mysterious blanks in your memory.

I know they tantalise you,' one of her mouths was saying, Ì could fill them for you, if you let our minds meet.'

The Doctor wrenched himself from several sets of Maya's arms and headed towards a small card table he hoped he could defend himself

with. 'Look, these blanks, Maya. I think you might be over-playing them. I expect I was drunk Either that or had a mind block put on me by some tribunal. These sorts of things are always happening I expect. I wouldn't set too much stall by them, I'm really not the big mystery you think I am.

I've memories of things that never happened too, you know.

Ìt's nothing special, just what comes from living your effects and causes the wrong way around sometimes. I'm filling the gaps in gradually on my own as I go along though, confabulating a history, just like you did with your train world,' he said. 'Which, if you don't mind, I'd still like you to release Nyssa from, so we can be on our way.

Ì' m sorry Doctor, I don't want to let you go'

`Funnily enough, I really don't want to stay. Even a surface knowledge of me should tell you I loathe injustice, and keeping Nyssa and myself imprisoned unwittingly, the way you planned to, is just the kind of wickedness I have battled all my life,' the Doctor essayed carefully. Maya seemed to react. With a flash of inspiration he reached for what he hoped was a trump card. 'How could I ever love a planet that seeks to enslave?'

he added.

They froze and faced each other, pursued and pursuer.

Ìf I released Nyssa, would you stay?' Maya offered at last. 'I *could* provide a perfect illusion of freedom for you if you agreed, you know: a never-ending Cosmos to explore, an illusory Nyssa by your side, if you wished it'

Àn‌d if I didn't agree?' the Doctor asked.

Ì don't want to threaten you, Doctor, my love,' Maya said sweetly. 'I know how much you hate threats, but I want you with me, and I'll do anything to keep you, even harm Nyssa:

Ìf you harmed Nyssa, I could never forgive you,' the Doctor warned hurriedly, 'never *ever* love you, you know that'

Òh, in time you would, when you came to understand. Once you loved me, you'd forgive anything,' Maya explained, matter-of-factly. There was something deeply disturbing about her confidence.

`Maya, how can I love you?' The Doctor said gently. 'You're a confused, contradictory planet, that's ill and needs help:

`Like your Earth, perhaps?' said Maya. 'The power to love *is* in you, Doctor! Let me show you, teach you'

The Doctor had run out of arguments, he waited for the inevitable.

`Very well,' he said. Slowly, tremblingly, Maya planted a kiss on the Doctor's lips, a perfect kiss in which, despite himself, the Doctor felt himself yield.Their bodies came together and the Doctor felt the full force of the con-trick called love course through him, and found himself utterly convinced.

Àll right,' breathed the Doctor when the kiss finally ended and their embrace broke apart, 'release Nyssa. Let her have the TARDIS and her freedom and I'll join you'

Maya's eyes glittered. 'I shall wake her at once!'

`Gently though,' the Doctor warned, 'if she's invested emotionally in the illusion she's living she'll be heartbroken and angry to-'

Ì know my work, Doctor,' said Maya, placing a finger on his lips. 'I will accelerate her story to an end and coax her from the train world back to ours. You will come to her in her dream state, tell her that you have chosen to leave her and that she must travel on alone. It will be handled well,' she promised:I will manoeuvre her to your ship between dream and awake, and once she leaves in it, she'll be free'

The Doctor felt a sudden pang. `Let me do it, let me lead her out,' he said, prising Maya's finger from his mouth and grasping her hand in his. Ì know me better than you. If she detects a single false note from me, she'll know there's an illusion at work. She'll never trust anything she sees or hear again.'

Èven that trauma can be eased.' Maya chuckled.

Perhaps,' blurted the Doctor, 'but if you want me to stay and become one with you, let you enter my inner mind with some blade, then we're going to have to start learning to meet halfway, aren't we?' He softened his voice. let me go to her,' he said. 'Let it be the true me that says goodbye.

I know it sounds ridiculous but I *will* explain later.Trust me'

`Because you're the Doctor?' asked Maya warily. 'How many have you betrayed with such words, I wonder?'

Òh. One or two, you know, only baddies,' said the Doctor lightly, gazing deep into Maya's dark eyes. 'You'll find out later won't you?' he added with a grin, daring her to see deceit in him.

Ì trust you, Doctor,' she said finally. 'I don't know you fully yet, and yet I trust what I know of you. I trust you know me well enough to realise that if you try to turn Nyssa against me, or are planning some kind of trick, her world could kill her in an eye blink, in dream and reality.'

The Doctor nodded and Maya gave him joint control of the dream.

The Doctor strode down the train corridor to his companion, arms 129

outstretched. The TARDIS stood behind her, decked in streamers, and Villeharduin and his children were hugging her like family. Catching sight of him Nyssa broke away and ran to greet him.They embraced.

`Well done Nyssa,' he said. 'A perfectly handled bloodless coup. You really are getting very good at all this.

Mellin Kinloch-Jones slapped Nyssa on the back as he passed and went over to shake Guilliame's hand. 'The Protectorate Collective have agreed to recognise us as a free train!' someone was cheering.

`Not quite bloodless,' Nyssa told the Doctor. 'My friend Burdine died to make it happen.'

Ì' m sorry, he said, angered to see real grief in his friend's eyes for someone who didn't even exist.

`Don't be,' she replied. 'He died for something he believed in, becoming the hero he dreamed of being.'

`You *did* do well,' the Doctor promised, feeling like a fraud.

`Much of it was down to Jennette,' Nyssa explained, pointing to the Chinese girl leading a guard by the hand up the corridor. 'She helped me synthesise the Emulon gas'

"Of course, Emulon 8!' the Doctor said. 'Empathy! Experimental twenty-first-century Earth crowd-control substance, wasn't it? People

exposed to it became more aware of each other's emotional signals and unconsciously mirrored each other in a positive feedback loop, yes?'

`That's right,' said Nyssa. 'They used it for quelling riots during the F.urowars'

Ì remember,' said the Doctor darkly. `Made a crowd into a herd, and then scared them into dispersing in a jiffy. Ingenious, if rather nasty.' He allowed himself to frown as if a thought was occurring to him 'Wasn't it banned?'

Ìt was, but I found the formula to synthesise it in the TARDIS

databanks,' Nyssa told him. Jennette and I bio-engineered it in the nursery labs and then released it into the air supply while the troubadour girls sang love songs through the intercom. It was the perfect way to enforce a state of togetherness, you see: plant the illusion of it and then let it slowly spread and come true!'

`How very apt,' the Doctor said quietly, fighting the urge to tell Nyssa that Emulon 8 was a fictional chemical he and Maya had concocted for convenience, and not even a very plausible one, come to that.

Ìt's time to go, Doctor, isn't it?' said Nyssa, watching the families celebrate behind her, Emiliege and Mellin arm in arm with Villeharduin.

`Perhaps for you, Nyssa, yes,' he replied hoarsely.

She looked at him in confusion. 'What do you mean?' she asked, hoping this wasn't what she thought.

He couldn't look at her. 'I never expected it to be this way, Nyssa,' he said quietly, gazing up at a faulty light in the corridor ceiling. 'Normally, it's 130

my friends that decide to stay behind on another world. It's them that fall in love, decide to help the rebels, rebuild a civilisation, never me. Until now.'

He tapped the light and it blinked on.

Ì need to settle down, actually help one lot of people properly, give myself some time to see a job through. I've been rattling about for too long,' he said, finally bringing his eyes down to look at his friend,

'never facing up to things, always moving on to the next mystery as soon as I've cracked the last one. I'm staying here, Nyssa. I need to give myself to one world.'

She stared at him in disbelief. 'I can help these people rebuild their humanity,' the Doctor continued, 'maybe find my own on the way. I'm going to stop being the Doctor, Nyssa, the person who goes about trying to heal the Universe and I'm going to start being me.'

`Very moving,' whispered Maya in the Doctor's head. 'You're a talented liar.'

`High praise from you, Maya,' he thought back. 'I thought it was all a bit over-wrought myself,' he lied.

Ì' m staying with you,' Nyssa said firmly, unaware of the Doctor's inner dialogue.

`No, Nyssa,' he said kindly. 'I've never done this before because I never believed anyone else could do my job.

`You've grown,' he explained, 'you don't need me any more, but I think the Universe still wants a Doctor. If you're prepared to be him - I think you're ready.You're at least the scientist I am, and at least the champion of good I've always tried to be.You're as fit to be the Doctor as anyone.'

Ì don't understand,' she said.`This isn't like you.'

Ìsn't it?' he said softly. 'Please. For me.'

Tut there's so much I don't know!' she protested.

'I know! I know!' exclaimed the Doctor, grabbing her arms and patting them in a curiously affectionate manner, 'but imagine your excitement finding it all out!'

Nyssa almost smiled. The Doctor hurried on before she could argue again.

`Now, you already understand a lot about the TARDIS. You probably think you know more than me, but there's a lot more to her than you might think.'

He ripped a page from one of his old diaries and started scribbling on it. 'I' m going to give you the codes to sever my connection to her

telepathic circuits and reattach them to you. Little by little, you'll learn how to work with her properly, how to learn from her.'

`Doctor, I really don't know if I'm ready for this -' Nyssa began, her eyes beginning to fill.

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If you thought you were, you wouldn't be. Cheap paradox I know, but life's full of them, especially ours.

`Please?' he said again, forcing his notes and a small Yale key into her hand. 'Spare TARDIS key, just in case you end up with any companions.'

Ì'll come back,' she said, blinking back her tears, trying to remember to be dignified.

`Perhaps, one day, you might,' he replied, trying to smile. 'Who knows?

But till then just go out there with an open mind, and try to make things better, Doctor Nyssa:

Ì love you, Doctor,' she began, 'You're like -'

'I know, and I love you like a child I lost long since,' the Doctor interjected, 'but we can't keep living in the past, can we? Not even with the TARDIS. It's time to face our futures'

He kissed her lightly on the cheek and span her round to face the TARDIS. She walked into it, snapping streamers as she went, and closed the door on him

`Thank you for letting me do that, Maya,' said the Doctor as he watched Nyssa leave.

Nyssa stepped into the TARDIS control room, her tears now unchecked, and went over to the console. She was alone now, all her friends and family gone. There was nothing but her and the Universe now Perhaps that was how the Doctor felt sometimes. Perhaps that aloneness had been why he'd had to stop being who he was.

Slowly, fingers shaking, she typed in the scrawled numeric sequence that would make the ship hers, make her the Doctor. Entering the final digit, and whispering a goodbye to her friend, she hit the

confirmation key.

The piece of paper vanished and a searing pain ran through her body as she passed out.

`Well done, Nyssa'

The Doctor was standing above her.

`What?'

He helped her up, gave her a light dusting and then began pressing keys on the console almost immediately:You broke us free,' he said,'Sorry if that psionic pulse gave you a bit of a shaking up I think old Kwundaar's psychic manipulation might have left you with a bit of residual sensitivity still'

Nyssa was confused. 'Free?' she said. 'From what?'

Òh, we were being kept prisoner by a fantasy-weaving computer planet that was using our minds to create a fictional world for us,' he explained, for all the world as if such things happened twice-weekly.

Èverything we experienced on that train back there was an illusion'

`Really?'

`Yes, really. Quite good, wasn't it?' he reflected, activating the dematerialisation circuits. 'Except for the odd silly name and bit of over-expositionary dialogue, of course,' he added:Even took me a while to spot and I've been in heaps of fictions.'

'Why?'

Àh. Well, we never quite got to the bottom of that,' said the Doctor, avoiding her gaze. 'I think she was just obeying her old programming because she needed something to do and someone to do it for, really. Her creators had died out, you see. Left her at a loose end.'

`Her, it was female?' Nyssa queried

`Figure of speech; like when I call the TARDIS "old girl",' the Doctor explained, playing a few experimental arpeggios across a key pad.

Ànd we've definitely escaped?' Nyssa asked.

`Yes, and quite cleverly too,' the Doctor said, looking up from his work.

`You see, I managed to wangle dual control of the illusion.That code I gave you Wasn't what I claimed. What it actually did was briefly boost the TARDIS's telepathic connection to me, rather than cutting it, allowing me to overwhelm the computer entirely, a fact I'd rather cunningly managed to hide right down in the deepest recesses of my mind'

He made a couple of arcing gestures with his forefingers, one up, one down, as if he felt this made the explanation clearer, and grinned.

`When you tapped it in, the consensual reality that we three had created suddenly had me as its dominant force and I was able to use a variant on Sidelian memory transfer to take total charge of the computer's systems.

Simple!'

`Really?' said Nyssa drily.

`No, not really,' the Doctor admitted coyly. 'Rather sapping, actually.

Could do with a glass of cordial to be honest.' He strode off briskly towards the kitchen.

Nyssa followed. There were big chunks of this tale the Doctor wasn't telling her, things that didn't add up.`Did you destroy this computer then?'

she asked.

The Doctor halted. 'Oh no, merely disabled her, got her all wrapped up in herself so she can't harm outsiders' He waited for Nyssa to ask how.

She didn't.

Ì've used her own illusion-spinning power against her,' he explained.

"there's a portion of her mind she doesn't know exists any more. I've reprogrammed it to create the totally convincing illusion that she still has me captured. Rather neat, don't you think? I've given her the illusion of giving me an illusion'

He set off down the corridor again, Nyssa in pursuit.

Ànd you're sure that *she* hasn't actually given you the illusion of giving her that illusion?' she said.

Ah, good point!' said the Doctor ticking it off in the air. 'I guess we'll have to assume not if we want our lives to have any meaning. Won't we?'

`That's not very reassuring, Doctor,' Nyssa said to his back.

`No, it isn't, is it?' he responded, turning to face her.`But what else have we got? We'll just have to be on the look out; keep our wits about us in case anywhere we land up seems unconvincing.' He patted her on the shoulder and moved off again.

`Will she have this illusion for ever, then, this computer?'

`Well, ideally yes, but forever's an awfully long time,' said the Doctor as he opened the kitchen door. 'I've left her a note explaining, in case it ever breaks down. Only seemed fair.'

`*Dear Maya,'* read the scrap of paper at the heart of the planet.

Ì can't fully explain why I'm writing this letter. I can never fully explain anything, can I? Maybe, one day. Probably not, though. There probably isn't enough later left for me to explain later in.

The truth is, I suspect the Universe isn't actually big enough to contain everything in it and a full explanation too. Even if it were, we'd never have time to read it all.

`Let's just say there are some mysteries we can never solve and my reasons for leaving you will have to be one of them.

`Was it your threat to Nyssa, your theft of my liberty or your kiss that promised me self knowledge that made me betray you? I'm not sure I fully know myself. I know you could have made me happy in time, and yet I fled the contentment you offered. I've fled contentment before, you know. Did you feel that at the surface of my mind?

Perhaps I have defined myself by my role for so long now that I don't quite know who I'd be without it. I sometimes think I may have become what I do, you see - following beliefs I once had, so fully, that I may have erased the man who believed them in their pursuit, and if I stopped doing what I do, I'd be no one. Does that seem plausible? I'm not sure myself

Perhaps, I am merely selling you the romantic ideal of a stranger who can not allow himself contentment in order to sell that same ideal to myself to excuse my running out on you and the cowardly deceit it involved. Who knows? Maybe this whole letter is an evasion?

Perhaps, one day, I can risk contentment, but not yet, Maya. Maybe later

`Thank you anyhow'

At the bottom of the letter was an indecipherable squiggle that was either an ink-blot, the Doctor's real name, or a convincing forgery.

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Maya watched the Doctor happily ever after, as he explored the fresh mysteries she made for him and he and she grew to know one another fully, both contentedly doing those things they did to feel whole.

Now and again, she worried about whether the Doctor had given her a mere illusion of holding him, just like she thought she'd given him an illusion of escaping, but only now and again.

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URANIA

The Muse of Astronomy

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The Astronomer's Apprentice

Simon A. Forward

Astronomy. Astrology. One letter this way, six letters that. Stand them side-by-side and, like Tweedledum and Tweedledee, they are too commonly confused. Not exactly light years apart, phonetically speaking, but two different worlds all the same.

On the one hand, the observation of the lives of the stars and the planets; on the other, the idea that the stars and planets play with people's lives. One is a fantastic study, ranging from the creation of the Universe to its very end, from the subbest of atomic particles to

the limits of infinity; the other a fantastic notion, born of the human imagination. Both encompass many lifetimes.

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of which can be said of me, in fact; which, whenever I think of it, is more than a bit of a giggle.

And something of a distraction when I'm confronted with the rather more serious question of how, where and when to begin my tale. Since my story concerns a marriage of diverse concepts, I suppose I could do worse than to start with something old, something new, something borrowed and something blue...

Now there's a recipe to feed the imagination.

Victoria was beginning to get very tired of sitting by the TARD I S on the riverbank; once or twice she had peeped over the Doctor's shoulder at the book he was reading, but it was all profoundly confusing, despite his patient attempts to explain. Not altogether surprising, given that the volume was the work of Neverglade, who it seemed - to Victoria at any rate

- was above many heads, in more ways than one.To her, the alien suggested an intelligence to rival the Doctor's, but with little of the accessibility.

It was just when the Doctor was licking his finger to turn another page, that Jamie came galumphing up the hill, huffing and puffing like the Flying Scotsman having made the run to the Highlands. 'Hurry up, you two! We'll be late!'

The young man's commotion had the Doctor glancing up, but in the meantime his moistened finger had stuck to the precious old page. In a panic he tugged the digit loose, while struggling to keep his place in the book, and somehow the weighty tome, far too big for the little fellow's lap, put an end to the matter by slamming closed.

The Doctor snatched his finger free and sucked at it, sparing a wounded glare at Jamie. 'Now look what you made me do!' he moaned like an old granny.

Jamie slowed his approach and stood there, catching his breath. 'Oh, you can still find your place, Doctor.That wee flap of paper is sticking

out.'

The wee flap of paper was worryingly ragged along one edge.

'Oh dear! *Now* look what you made me do!' the Doctor moaned again, this time very much more like a giddy aunt. Wincing at the damage and the pain in his finger, he teased the pages apart to examine the extent of the tear. By no means disastrous, it was unfortunately magnified by the fact that it was alone in the entire book. Judging by the impression Victoria had gained on their first visit to Neverglade's library, it was probably the only torn page in the alien's entire collection. And unique things, like the TARDIS, took on dimensions all their own.

Òh Doctor,' the young girl sympathised, but not without the faintest threat of a giggle, `do you think you'll be in terrible trouble?'

`Well, I don't know, Victoria! Neverglade takes very great care of his library!'The Doctor's fingers fussed over the tear, patting it smooth in the futile hope of disguising the join. It was like watching a conscientious schoolboy who'd accidentally defaced the Mona Lisa, doing his utmost to restore her enigmatic smile with a crayon. He examined his repairs unhappily. 'I don't expect he'll be very pleased, do you?'

Jamie shrugged, trying to throw off his own share of the guilt. 'Maybe it's for the best. Maybe he'll not let you back in there again'

`Yes, thank you, Jamie.'

Òh, amie's only trying to look on the bright side' The Doctor's scowl was dark enough to eclipse any bright side, but Victoria was undeterred.

`You have been spending far too much time there, and you brought us here for a holiday.'

Ì did, didn't I?'The Doctor hopped up from where he'd been sitting and closed the book with gentle solemnity, tucking the giant volume under his arm. 'But this is a fantastic opportunity for me, Victoria, to study the work of a fellow scientist. Imagine! An attempt to map all the stars and the planets in motion, a sort of virtual orrery of the universe. It's the work of a lifetime, and an incredibly long lifetime at that. Now that's something worth taking a long look at, wouldn't you say?' He seemed mildly disappointed to find she had very little to say. 'In any case, that's the nature of holidays, isn't it? Some of us like to go

paddling and build sandcastles, some of us prefer to drag our feet around the museums'

Aye,' put in Jamie impatiently, 'and some of us like to attend a feast or two'

Victoria started to rise and the Doctor proffered a hand to help her aloft. `So you're saying you've no time for sandcastles, Doctor?'

Àctually, I think they're rather fun' His eyes shone. 'Come along, I expect Jamie's anxious not to miss his lady friend' He allowed sufficient pause for Jamie's blushes to blossom. 'A party might not be the best place 140

to break the news to Neverglade, but if we're lucky we might at least fmd him in a good mood'

He turned to tramp off along the bank. Victoria linked arms with Jamie, ready to set off after him and happy to be on their way to somewhere more entertaining.

`Did I ever tell you about the beaches on Ostermede Six? Or was it Seven? Perfect sand for castles; the monarchy was using the one I built as a summer palace the last time I visited...'

The Doctor's voice rambled on ahead, following the river downstream.

The monster loomed large over Jamie, witch-talons raking the air, snatching for its pound of flesh. So close, it seemed Jamie's heart was about to be from his chest untimely ripp'd.

Jamie laughed a little nervously in the face of the creature's menacing pose and put his lips to the mouthpiece of his bagpipes. The monster stared impassively down, watching him play.

Devil-eyes, embedded deep under a demon-brow; snake-tongue poking out between vampire-fangs to lick its gargoyle-lips; lion-mane cladding its serpent-neck all the way down to its dragon-scaled torso, mounted high on tyrannosaur-limbs and tapering to a scorpion tail; giant bat-wings spreading to cast a raven-ragged shadow. A hideous hybrid of a hundred nightmares, none of them Jamie's. Moss and lichen patched the cracks and chips all over its petrified hide.

Lanterns, hanging in the trees all around, glowed timidly in its presence.

Jamie's chosen party piece was a lament, but wasn't nearly as woeful as the Doctor's clumsily tootled rendition of *Three Blind Mice* that had preceded it.The Melkur, lucky thing, was stone deaf.

As the brave lad finished, polite applause was offered up, led by the two Consuls who had deigned to attend. I clapped heartily, because I knew Jamie would especially appreciate the enthusiasm coming from me.

As he made his way back through the audience, the Doctor was standing to afford him a 'Well done, Jamie'. Whereas I trapped him in a congratulatory hug, squeezing a very pained complaint from the bagpipes in the process.

Ìf music be the food of love,' I said, `that was a very generous helping of porridge and haggis'

Jamie stood back for a better look at me. Òch, more of your teasing'

I couldn't resist a chuckle. (I rarely can.) 'You're so wise to me already, Jamie McCrimmon,` My smile commended him, and I curtsied primly.

`Well, now, if you'll excuse me, it's my fifteen minutes. If I can spin it out for that long'

The hem of my heavy velvet gown brushing the leaves across the flagstones (I'm sure they design the local dresses that way to keep the 141

walkways tidy), I approached the statue and patted its formidable chest as if it hadn't once been a living and very evil creature.As tradition required, I accorded first the Consuls, then the Melkur a curtsy, and introduced myself: 'Viola. Companion of Neverglade. He sends his apologies, he's busy stargazing as ever. But I'd like to recite a poem in honour of this Melkur.'

It was all a bit formal for me, but murmurs of approval travelled the small amphitheatre. Behind me, the waves whispered their approval to the shore. 'It's not my own work,' I added unnecessarily - because I like to do unnecessary things - 'but I shall do the verse proud: Casting my gaze up at the beast(ie), I wondered whether it admired the view from this headland. I was fairly sure it couldn't have admired some of the previous cultural tithes presented in its honour: some were little more than lyrical afflictions.Tennyson's elbow, you might say. No wonder the poor thing was petrified.

My own choice, on the other hand, hailed from a distant culture, but was, I couldn't help feeling, a fairly safe bet.

Twas brillig and the slithy toves,' I began, *'did gyre and gimble in the wabe;All mimsy were the borogoves'* - and here I winked at Jamie *And*

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the mome raths outgrabe.'

He was, like me, thinking back to the moment we'd all met.

`Hullo there! You're a day early for the Feast'

The three of them were standing before the Melkur, a kindly professor conducting his students on a field trip; the mineral monstrosity the only exhibit in this museum of supernatural history.

The evening was a balmy one and I was still jaunty and pleasantly breathless after a cliff-top stroll. The kindly professor was preoccupied, scraping speculatively at the moss with a penknife, so I flounced up and proffered my hand to the young lad.

`Hullo,' I chirped. 'I'm Mimsy. Mimsy Borogoves:

Òh aye, well, I'm Jamie:The breeze played with his kilt and I sneaked a peek at his knees,Ànd this is Victoria:The young girl stepped forward, all meek and pretty in a lacy summer dress. And: Jamie glanced around, 'this is the Doctor:

But of course, I knew that.A little man with a personality that was even bigger on the inside than the outside: dimensionally transcendental, I expect. But his clothes were just about baggy enough to encompass all the things he was: Mad Hatter with many hats, March Hare with the hair of a Beatle, and Dormouse who opened too many doors.

`Yes, the Doctor pocketed the penknife and abandoned his study for the present, 'I think the young lady is having a little fun with you, Jamie'

It was an enchanting combination• that childlike smile on such a wise old face. Like Stan Laurel with gravitas. 'How do you do, miss?' he said.

`Fine, generally. Even finer on a night like tonight:

`Yes, I expect it's the excitement: His good-humoured diagnosis made me chuckle. 'Perhaps you'd care to tell us about this Feast? My companions and I are here on holiday.'

`Holiday? How wonderful! Me too!' I danced around behind the Melkur.

`That is, my friend is here for his magnum of opiates. He's a scientist and very little else. Whereas I am very often on holiday: Ducking under the statue-monster's forearm, I greeted my new friends from the other side.

`Yes, the Feast. It's all in his honour.' I patted the creature's impressive flank. 'Fabulous, isn't he? You simply must come. And I'm sure you'll all manage to prepare something in no time at all.'

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`Prepare something? What are we expected to prepare?' Victoria wondered.

Òh, it's a local tradition,` So I explained all about the Feast of Melkur.

How the people gathered annually to bombard the calcified creature with poetry, music, dance, recitals and performing arts of all varieties and calibres. 'It's a kind of wake, to ease its passing, as the poor beast crumbles away and passes into the earth, ultimately to become part of the all-embracing biomatrix of the Traken Union:

I propped myself against one of the Melkur's muscular hindlegs.

Àctually, I'm being a tiny bit unfair on the native arts - we're a cultured lot, we Trakenites. It's just that my sense of humour is rather wicked.

Although never enough to turn me to stone.'

The Doctor beamed around at his companions. 'Well, it sounds just the ticket.And what about this scientist friend of yours? Will he be attending?'

`Neverglade? Well, you *might* see him there. But he's about as much fun as a stamp collector. He's usually far too pre-, post- and plain *occupied* with his life's work.'

Òh yes, and what is that?'

A map of the stars.' Me being me, I said it like it was the simplest thing ever.

Perhaps it was that self-same simplicity that the Doctor found so irresistible. 'Really? Any in particular?'

Àll of them.'

I Consul Kerana claimed a headache - or it claimed her - and bowed out early from the Feast. (Neverglade, of course, had stayed away in the end.) It had been a subdued and uneasy affair, in any case, with too many half-hearted artistes coming over all nervous and tentative, as though struck by stage-fright; while too many others seemed intoxicated by their moment in the limelight, and over-egged the performance pudding to the extent that, by rights, they should have been whisked or beaten off.

Guests fell away from the party like autumn leaves from a tree. Consul 143

Jarvaran was left to lead the traditional torchlight procession down to the beach, and only a few hangers-on and the Melkur remained to pick over the remains of the banquet.

Victoria found Jamie and I at one of the tables, sampling the warm night air and a glass each of lachanium-bud liqueur. Sadly, I think the heather scent made him a touch homesick and I was doing my best to lift his spirits by extolling the virtues of Traken's more spectacular sights and promising to show him some of them the following day.

Victoria's eyes roamed the Grove, looking rather lonely. Did either of you see where the Doctor went?' she asked.

I tipped my head in the direction of the cliff path. Three guesses: Her shoulders sagged. 'I only need one.'

Àye, well, to be fair, he had to return that book.'

Victoria shot a look at Jamie, as if he'd said too much. 'I'd better try to catch up with him. He shouldn't go wandering off on his own like that.

You know what he's like.'

Jamie stood. 'D'ye want me to come with you?'

`No, Jamie, I'm sure I'll be fine: Victoria smiled my way. This is the Traken Union, remember. The most tranquil place in the universe. The Doctor said nothing bad can happen here:

Jamie was not wholly convinced, I could tell. 'I, for one,' I said brightly,

`will drink to that!' I raised my glass. `By the way, I'm taking Jamie on a trek upriver tomorrow.You should join us.'

She pretended to think about it,`No, thank you. I think I'll stay here with the Doctor, if you don't mind Thank you, all the same. Good night.'

So saying, Victoria turned and headed off along the path, eventually disappearing into the night.

It's ironic, as you'll discover, but of the three of them, it was Victoria who never really took a shine to me. A Pre-Raphaelite maiden, peaches-and-cream complexion, flowing hair of chestnut, hazelnut and every other shade of nut appropriate to my character; and a predilection for eighteenth-century attire and vivid colours: I am not - thank the stars! -

to everyone's taste. But there was never anything Victoria actively disliked about me; it was just that she couldn't help feeling a little cool towards me.

As if she never really knew what to make of me.

Nested on a proud hilltop, overlooking the grand estuary, Neverglade's observatory was like a crystal moon that had accidentally set on the wrong side of the horizon. Victoria forged her way up through the surrounding bushes, her gaze drawn into the impossible depth of the glass walls. Shapes like reflections of dreams were trapped *(imprisoned?)* in each diamond facet.

Victoria's sense of wonder had scarcely diminished from the first time **I had** conducted them all here.

She circled its base, one hand gliding across its smooth surface, trying to find the doorway.There, her fingers dipped into the glass, like the

cool waters of a lake.

Steeling her nerves, she stepped into the mirror. And through to the other side.

Through the thickest of lenses, nothing of the outside world could be discerned.The interior was spectacle enough.

Victoria was standing inside a crystal ball, a glimpse of space and time in each facet of the chamber walls. Crystalline plinths, consoles and a sort of low pulpit sprouted from the black marble floor, housed in strange antler-like growths, all fused and tangled together. A few benches and mushroom-shaped stools, similarly nested, were topped with softly luminous avocado cushions. Close to the central pulpit a stairwell descended as though into the earth, dark and inviting as a magic rabbit-hole.All around, reaching to waist height, shelves were recessed deep into the glass, accommodating row **upon** row of serious-looking books.

To Victoria's right, the Doctor was patting one of the weighty volumes in place.

He stepped back, as if he'd been caught at the biscuit jar. And he hastily brushed his lapels, as if cleaning away the telltale crumbs. Àh, Victoria. I thought you'd be in bed by now.'

`Time does not sleep. Why should any of us?'

Neverglade's voice seemed to resonate off the prism walls, rather than emanate from anywhere near him.The alien stood high in his pulpit, like a preacher passing silent judgement over his congregation.Although if the local pastor had resembled Neverglade, he was unlikely to have much of a congregation for long.

The astronomer was tall and spindly limbed, his dark robes hanging in strips over the suggestion of a sinewy and skeletal frame. His head was like fireside bellows, with a drooping anteater snout and a single 'eye', a fat black teardrop. His fish-lipped mouth was rimmed with reed-like feelers and antler-like growths erupted from his neck, all the branches fused and interlaced to cup the great head and form a very rough sort of ruff. Beneath the murky waters of the 'eye', there lurked the slimy apparition of a brain.

Victoria did her best to look directly at the alien without feeling faintly ill. It was the polite thing to do.

Tes:The Doctor cleared his throat. 'Neverglade has just been telling me how relatively unimportant some of these books have become. Since we've already transferred the data from so many of them:

`The Doctor's assistance has been invaluable, but he has also exposed
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gaps in my knowledge. Thus, there is more to be done. There is always more to be done.The construct is a scale model, but a miniature universe is still a universe.

`Yes, well, I'll admit it's daunting, but there's no need to lose heart.There's never any need for that: The Doctor shone a smile on Victoria. He tipped his head modestly at the astronomer. 'In any case, there were very few gaps. I think it's fair to say Neverglade is more widely travelled than I am'

'Possibly?The astronomer made a surly sort of chomping sound.'But I have an advantage. I do not need to travel far to scan and model each system.As I told you, Doctor, I have engineered myself as the perfect receptor of all things celestial. *Mass,* motion, emissions across the entire spectrum. My observatory is merely an extension, a means of recording it all:

'It is all very beautiful,' Victoria complimented the alien.

'Bah! Aesthetics, child, are immaterial.' His weeping-willow fingers paused in their manipulations of the antler-growths around him, just long enough to gesture at the images locked inside the chamber walls. 'Its beauty lies in its motion, the mechanics of it all. Rotations within rotations, orbits within orbits. The spin of galaxies, the turn of Time's wheel, the cycle of electrons around their atomic cores:

'Yes, it's enough to make anyone dizzy,' agreed the Doctor, a look of roguish whimsy for Victoria's benefit.

But she knew he was as enthralled with it all as Neverglade. His eyes kept returning to the multi-faceted walls as though travelling the stars depicted within.

'Doctor,' ventured Victoria, in a library sort of hush, 'I hope you haven't forgotten it's the Gardenship Festival tomorrow:

The Doctor gave her an affectionate pat. 'Yes, yes, of course, I shall be there. Don't worry about me. I shall be up bright and early and I'll join you before it all starts. Some time in the afternoon, I expect.' Victoria's

heart sank. Despite his best intentions, she knew the Doctor would find himself occupied here all day long. Still, she couldn't begrudge him that sparkle in his eye. The details might remain beyond her understanding, but the passion was something she could comprehend.

'And I'm sure you and Jamie can have lots of fun until I get there: the Doctor reassured her.

And his kindness, as always, deserved a smile. 'Do you mind if I stay here a while? I' m not feeling very sleepy yet.'

'I don't see why not. If that's all right with Neverglade!

'Ha! Compared to Viola's incessant distractions, the child will be welcome:

'Well, there we are, that's settled: The Doctor smiled and withdrew to one of the antler-lattice consoles.

Victoria sat herself down on the nearest stool and watched the two
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scientists at work. There wasn't much to see, with both the Doctor and Neverglade manning their stations, each poring over the pages of a book, exclusively focused on the content while they grasped the antler-like antennae to either side and made subtle manipulations. Not exactly edge-of-the-mushroom entertainment.

Unsurprisingly, Victoria's gaze returned again and again to the astronomical kaleidoscope that surrounded her, the stars and planets so apparently alive in the depths of the looking-glass universe; and she wondered how many of those worlds she had travelled with the Doctor.

And wondered how many more she might see.

A sleepy-rattlesnake sound caused her to look at Neverglade.

There was something listless in the way the astronomer flipped another page and began scratching at it with a quill-like finger. Victoria realised she had heard a sigh, whispering through the reeds lining the alien's lips.

Ìs everything all right?' she asked timorously.

The' inquiry broke the Doctor out of his own concentration and he

looked across to Neverglade.

All of a sudden,' the alien admitted, 'I find I am tired'

`Yes,' he said, 'I expect it is rather late, now that you mention it. Almost late enough to be called early:

'No, Doctor, I am weighed down, burdened: Neverglade seemed to shrink inside his pulpit, as he cast his bulbous eye up to the crystal heavens. 'By all this knowledge. Stars, planets, galaxies, I feel their gravity pulling at me. It is too great a task. I will never complete it: The Doctor looked horrified. 'But you've come so far. Many great undertakings are left incomplete. But think of your legacy, your contribution to the field.'

`Perhaps. But my life is so very long. And this undertaking never goes away. Even in my sleep, my thoughts are heavy with the masses of the planets in motion.'

`But you've come too far to give up now, haven't you? That's what you're doing here, recording everything, your entire work, preserving it for posterity, so that it needn't weigh you down any more:

Victoria followed the exchange, her eyes darting back and forth.There was passion and power in the Doctor's voice and she had every faith in his powers of persuasion. She was only surprised at just how much it seemed to matter to him

`Thank you, Doctor. For all your help. Your wisdom: Neverglade issued another sigh and this time Victoria saw the reeds dance like sea-anemones in the currents. 'Still, I am persuaded it is time to retire'

`But you can't! You've come too far!'

Neverglade seemed taken aback by the force of the Doctor's appeal. `To bed, Doctor.That is all I mean:

Òh.Yes.Yes, of course:

Neverglade hauled himself up and stalked patiently to the stairwell. His precision movements reminded Victoria of a circus performer on stilts.

She watched as he disappeared out of sight; for all she knew, down

into the earth.

`Well, goodnight then,' the Doctor bade him, looking thoughtful in the same way he always did whenever he was about to play his recorder. He didn't produce the instrument this time though and instead wandered over to Neverglade's pulpit. With a pantomime pretence of an afterthought, he sidled up and installed himself in the alien astronomer's place.

`Doctor:Victoria stage-whispered, 'what are you doing?'

The Doctor wore his guilty schoolboy look, but he cast it off quickly. Ì'm just doing Neverglade a favour, Victoria. To say there's an awful lot to do would be a remarkable understatement.And I can achieve a great deal more from the main console here.Take things up where he left off, so to speak:

'Oh, Doctor, do you really think you ought?'Victoria tried not to make it sound too obvious she was anticipating trouble, but to gauge from the Doctor's wounded expression she had failed dismally

`Well, you know, there's been very little I've been able to contribute so far.There were really very few gaps in his knowledge.And I'd like to make some sort of difference if I can.' Clearing his throat and rubbing his palms together, the Doctor reached for a couple of the antler-like protrusions either side of him. `Yes, I think I've got the hang of this. It's simply a matter of adjusting the telepathic frequency'

Victoria realised she could fret better standing up. 'Oh, Doctor: Now,Victoria:The Doctor meditated on the open book on the lectern-style arrangement in front of him.`This is a delicate operation. It's a matter of linking my mind to the Observatory and focusing on the data on the page. I'll be acting as a sort of interface between the book and the Observatory, interpreting the data and reconstructing it as part of the model within the crystalline structure: He savoured some of the words like the favourite parts of a meal, but by the end his features had resolved into a cautionary warning. 'Neverglade has taken a lot of time to compile his records accurately and I don't want to make any mistakes now, do I?

It wouldn't do to stick a planet in the wrong place or get the size of a star wrong, would it?'

Victoria wasn't sure she entirely understood the process involved, and she was still less sure the Doctor should be tampering with any of it. But she was sure that if he was going to meddle, it was better for

everyone if he did everything correctly.And it was clear the Doctor needed her to be quiet. She sat back down and wrung her hands in her lap, as the Doctor assumed what looked like it might be a permanent frown.

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Intermittently, he would reach down to flip a page, but his mask of concentration remained fixed and intense.

Victoria waited and watched and waited and watched. It looked distressingly likely that the Doctor would be occupied here all night and she wondered if she would be able to endure, to stay here until he emerged from his working trance.

Still, as the hour grew later, she caught herself yawning.And eventually, she admitted to her earlier white lie: she had in fact been ready for bed a long time ago. Feeling a little left out, Victoria left.

To my way of thinking, Traken is the sort of place where unicorns ought to exist. They don't, but in their stead, the native equivalent of the horse is sufficiently like a horse to be called a horse.At least for the purposes of my tale. Sleek and sturdy, the animal bears a flowing mane and a go-faster blaze of fine hair along each flank, with fetching tufts at its shanks, and its gallop is quite enough like a gallop to be called a gallop.

The Trakenites dress their 'horses' with flourishes, threading manes and tails with ribbons and bells, so that, as Jamie and I rode, there was a tambourine accompaniment to the drumming of hooves. The animals made swift work of the ten-mile ride inland, the tails of my bright red redingote revelling in the slipstream all the way.

By the time we were ready to slow, the pair of us were quite flushed with exhilaration and the wind on our faces. Neither of us had much breath left to be taken by the view.

Still, what there was, it took.

Drakendir!' I called out. 'Dragon's Cup!'

Over the crusty lip of a giant funnel, a lake crashed eternally into the canyon below. The Dragon roared, from deep in the world's belly, as it guzzled down the foaming cascade and exhaled gigantic clouds of spray.

They hung in the air like snow-white nebulae, masking all but the darkest gouges in the sheer canyon wall. It was like heaven pouring into hell, cooling the underworld's temper.

Spiking up through the mist, ferocious water stampeding by on either side, a princely tower stood sentinel over the falls. For added effect, a rainbow arced high over the scene and plunged headlong into the river valley Ìt's incredible.'Those were all the words I could hear from Jamie, above the din.

Drawing our steeds to a halt, we dismounted and walked them steadily up the incline towards the yawning precipice. I tethered my horse to a rather lonesome tree and waited while Jamie did the same. He came up to join me, basking in the view.

`What's the use of you tower there?' Hands braced on hips, he nodded at the precarious spire. 'How does anyone reach it?'

`Shall I show you the way?'

Jamie, watching the tower hemmed in by the thrashing mass of water, looked dubious. 'If ye know it.'

`Better than a native!' I declared happily, pirouetting for the sheer fun of it.

Jamie frowned, as though he couldn't quite make me out against the stunning backdrop. 'Aye, how is that? That's what I'd like to know. You know Traken so well, and yet you say you're just a visitor, a traveller, like the Doctor,Victoria and me.And - and you called yourself a Trakenite.'

I winked and tapped the side of my nose. 'It's a puzzle'

Leaving Jamie doing his level best to work it out, I disappeared over the edge.

Victoria wandered the Grove, exploring the winding flagstone paths away from the fearsome Melkur. Passing under a trelliswork archway, she gasped as she found exactly what she was looking for.

But there were no Fosters in attendance and she didn't want to take without asking.There was no one. Not even a serpent to tempt her. (And even if there had been, this was Victoria, and I'm certain he

would have had more luck tempting the forbidden fruit to take a bite out of her.) The garden was empty. Or rather, it was full, but only of the normal things for a Traken garden - like age and plant life.

She had stumbled upon a secluded little enclave, bounded by flowerbeds and walls that must have looked ancient when they were built. Lichen and leafy shadows ranged over a humble-looking gazebo tucked over to one side. There were all kinds of plants and flowers reminiscent of angelica, hyacinth, sweet william, the rose family and others, although they were, of course, no relation; but the greenery scaling the stonework were surely distant cousins of jasmine and ivy, light years removed. Everywhere, the rebellious plants spilled over their borders in a verdant riot, with most of the nobler colours standing aloof in their midst. An elliptical bed formed the centrepiece, abundant with colourful shrubs and bushes in full bloom, including a host of deep crimson roses that had, above all the others, attracted Victoria's eye.

À Traken garden is something of a supervised wilderness' The voice startled her. Victoria backed up a step as she whirled round. A tall, dark, handsome stranger was seated on the bench in the gazebo. She must have missed seeing him there. He rose and stepped out into the daylight, although he was no less dark and no less handsome for it. Graciously, he presented his hand, and threw in a smile to go with it. 'We like them a little untidy, the way nature prefers.'

Ì - I was looking for some flowers,' she explained quickly. 'For the Festival. I'm - I'm sorry if I disturbed you'

`Disturbed?' The man stood there like a fairy-tale prince, as though trying the word on for size, and seemed amused to find that it fitted the situation like a glass slipper on an ugly sister. 'Quite the opposite.

Everything in the Grove, including myself, he laid a hand on his chest,

`welcomes every breath of fresh air and every ray of sunlight. You are quite lovely, Victoria.'

`You - you know my name? How can you?'

Ì pay close attention to everything that happens around me: There was no menace in his smile, only charm, and yet his familiarity unnerved Victoria all the same.

Ì really ought to be getting back,' she said. 'I think some wildflowers should do just as well.Thank you. Goodbye'

Always one to remember her manners, even when in a hurry, Victoria gave a quick bow of her head, before turning and scurrying through the archway. She did risk a glance back through the foliage, but there was no sign of the stranger and the place seemed a shade gloomier for his absence.

Victoria hurried her pace.

As she materialised in the Observatory, Consul Symia was disappointed to discover she was still wearing the same troubled expression she'd had when she'd stepped into the glass. She had expected life as a beam of light, if only for a fraction of a second, to be a more uplifting experience.

'It can be a little disorienting,' sympathised the funny little man they called the Doctor. 'I'm sure I must have looked much the same the first time I came through' Symia was sure he must have looked nothing liked her -

at least she sincerely hoped not. `Consul Symia, isn't it?' He had a habit of drawing out the last syllable of her name, making it sound quite soothing.

He started fussing about at one of the seats, brushing off the cushions, despite the complete absence of dust inside the chamber. 'Come and sit down.To what do we owe this honour?'

He was courteous and had a charming voice, of sandy beaches and soft brown sugar. Symia wandered over.

Ì am feeling; she began, conscious of the attention on her - especially now that Neverglade had looked up from his work, 'out of sorts' She sat down, taking a moment to rearrange the skirt of her velvet gown.

Neverglade made a sound like a grunt. 'Simple biophotonic conversion'

Ì'm very sorry to hear that,' the Doctor added, 'but I'm not a medical -'

Ìt is not a matter for a physician,' Symia interrupted, And it's not the displacement that troubles me. Would I be right in thinking, Neverglade, that your Observatory operates on a similar conversion principle?'

Neverglade scoffed, from over in his pulpit. Bah! Chalk and cheese! The upload of data requires much more than a photonic conversion.There is 151

a massive - astronomical! - amount of data pertaining to each celestial body. Far more than contained in the structural map of a single biological entity:

The Doctor, like many a natural diplomat, developed a timely sore throat. 'What Neverglade is saying, Consul Symia, is that we are dealing here with an incredible amount of data. Mapping entire galaxies, the orbital paths and stellar magnitudes of each star, particle and spectral emissions, planetary motions and compositions, comets, pulsars, quasars and black holes. The whole kit and caboodle of - well, to put it another way, all of it. It all takes a great deal of concentration,` He glanced at Neverglade. And shortens patience considerably:

Symia searched what she could see of the universe in the Observatory walls, appreciating the scale as best she could. 'Well, I have no wish to intrude. But I have been feeling troubled of late. Nothing I can pinpoint.

Dark and ominous feelings. They have been keeping me awake. And; she drew a preparatory breath, 'you must understand, we are relatively unaccustomed to visitors here:

Ah, so you come to us with your suspicions.' Neverglade made mashing noises, as though chewing something to a pulp.

'Of course.' Symia felt the alien's tone putting her back up, but at least sitting straight lent her sarcasm more authority. 'I wondered if you might have divined some portents in the stars.'

'Bah! Astrology! Superstitious hokum. A fantasy! The pretty, whimsical cousin of astronomy, not fit to wear its crown.The prince and the pauper.

It flirts with the idea of being something noble, but it makes a toy of science and makes fools of otherwise rational people! You, Consul, are a representative of a cultured, advanced civilisation. You should be ashamed.'

'I was joking.' Symia flared her nostrils at the alien. Her nose had always been widely regarded as her most elegant feature.

'He is rather direct, isn't he?' The Doctor interceded with a smile made for defusing a wide variety of social bombs:Takes a bit of getting used to.

You were saying, Consul Symia?'

'We *are* advanced; Symia insisted,'but superstition has evolved with us.

We live as part of a biomatrix. I wonder if you understand what that means. We exist, bonded with all life, the rocks, the waters, the air and the energies that permeate throughout. And we live on a world where evil cannot endure. Where it is *petrified.'* She allowed the full weight of the word to sink in. 'But there is always the fear that it only lies dormant, suppressed. And the possibility that unknown factors might stir those forces.

'The fact is, people have been behaving *unusually* of late. In the light of my own anxieties, I've taken it upon myself to determine whether any 152

of these factors have any foundation in your presence here' She looked from Neverglade to the Doctor. 'As I stated, we are unused to visitors'

Àccustomed enough to give your evil visitors a name,' Neverglade observed.

`Melkur.Yes.A fly caught in honey.' Symia pondered the creature in the nearby Grove and the unsatisfactory end to last night's Feast.Èvil is, sadly, a more common visitor amongst us. It seeks to crush us because of what we have here. But the more powerful it is, the greater Traken's opposition'

Ìn which case, you should be entirely safe,' the Doctor posited optimistically. But a little worry crept into his voice all the same. 'You're not saying there is evil at work here, are you?'

`No, Doctor. Not quite. It's quite possible these are paranoid, irrational fears on my part, with no more basis in reality than astrology.' She waited out Neverglade's irritable murmurs. 'But the irrational cannot be altogether ignored, especially here in the Union'

`No, I 'imagine not.'The Doctor knitted his brow and scratched pensively at his cheek. 'Your biomatrix is a finely balanced system'

`Ha!' Neverglade flexed a spindly arm:If it is irrational concerns you are looking for, then you need only talk to my companion, Viola. She

is all the disturbance needed to upset any finely balanced system!'

Hm, yes, you said she was a distraction'

`More than that, Doctor.'The alien astronomer shook his head and Symia tried not to notice the brain moving about inside. 'Much more! I am a finely balanced system, as is my Observatory. I have first hand experience of her - and far too much, at that. She is a distraction with her frivolous ways, yes, but she is also a disruption! Her presence often jams or corrupts the emissions I scan from other stars and planets. Her presence here could easily be upsetting the local balance of nature. Believe me, she is a constant interference to me, like static on the brain' Symia grimaced.Ì am always having to send her out of my presence, just to ensure my reception is clear.'

`What? But you shouldn't have brought her to a place like Traken,` The Doctor's face dropped. 'And she's off somewhere with Jamie right now!'

Symia sat silently. Feeling suddenly forgotten.

`You haven't been here long! So I'm guessing you haven't heard the legend of Araken!'

Ì can barely hear you!'

I laughed. I know! But it's all right! A legend like this should be shouted!

From the roof of the world, ideally speaking, but we'll make do!'

Jamie had found the steps easily enough and followed me down on to the ledge.A walkway had been cut a short depth into the cliff, all the way across to the other side. It made for a very narrow but sheltered stage, 153

albeit with a sheening curtain, forever crashing down before us and shrouding us in a watery twilight.

Jamie regarded the tumbling wall of water a little warily, but I knew the most it would drown was our words, if we were too timid with our own roars. So I imagined the noise as a whole world, out beyond the curtain, offering up its applause.A crescendo that would never end.

`They say a Prince and Princess battled a fire-breathing demon and buried him at the heart of a world called Araken! A lost world that

good people cannot see! Where all evil is channelled away! They say that was how the Union was founded!

`You know, I'm sure those first Trakenites came here for the danger!

That's why they built this place, because they missed a sense of danger!

The thrills and spills!'

Àye, and there's plenty of both here!' Jamie chanced a peep over the edge, trying to see if there was any gap between the rush of water and the sheer cliff.

He'd taken the words right out of my mouth. So all I was left with was a chuckle. I toned it down into a smile. 'Is that why you're here, Jamie?!

For the danger?!'

Jamie looked faintly confused. I missed part of what he said, but it ended clearly enough in,' - holiday!'

`No! Why are you *here?! With me!* You should be with Victoria!'

The poor boy looked mystified. He shrugged. 'She said she could take care of herself!' He thought it over some more. 'And - and this is the Traken Union! According to the Doctor, it's about the most peaceful place in the universe!'There was irony in the fact that he was shouting all this, but his meaning was plain enough.`There's nothing much dangerous that can happen here! But if there's anyone can land themselves in trouble here, well, I'm getting the feeling it'll be you.'

He turned all humble and apologetic, as if he might have offended me.

I laughed kindly. 'None taken! I'm flattered!' I sauntered back towards him and planted a kiss on his cheek. It quickly bloomed into a rose, but the falls-filtered halflight spared him his blushes. 'You're a true knight, Jamie McCrimmon You wear your shiniest armour on the inside.'

Àye, maybe so,' he recovered himself with due modesty, 'just don't go jumping off any more cliffs.Ye take a lot of looking after?

Ànd if I hide myself in the tower, will you come boldly to my rescue?'

`Rescue you from what?'

Òh, Jamie, it's only *pretend.'* I huffed like a child who couldn't get through to a grown-up. 'But you're right. We need a worthy opponent? I recalled what I'd said about shining armour, and inspiration struck. 'How about,' I said, 'your very own rainbow warrior? We'll call him, Sir Real of Dali!'

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So saying, I ducked out of the way for the villain to make his entrance.

And the rainbow cut like a spectral blade through the waterfall, until the beam shone on our stage and became a figure. A knight in colour-banded armour, armed with his own Richard-Of-York-Gave-Battle-In-Vain l' broadsword. And, in a manner I thought very rude - even for a villain -

swung his blade at Jamie's head.

l' Jamie, agog though he was, just managed to duck in time. Although of course, the illusion, conjured by my own good self, could never have harmed a hair of his head.

The rainbow sword sparked into the cliff face and hacked out a chunk of rock.

'Oh!' I said, inadequately. 'That shouldn't have happened!'

Victoria was getting very tired sitting by the fireside in her rooms at Caslandir.The skies outside had clouded and cooler air was finding its way in, while something else was making her shiver. Her lip curled with worry, she fiddled with a strand of her hair. Shivering again, she launched herself **out of her armchair and reached for the ornamental poker to one side of the fireplace. Touching the instrument to the hearth she activated the flames and stood back to feel the benefit of the heat.**

She backed into a presence.

A man - the tall, dark, handsome stranger - came around beside her. In his hand he held one of the blood-crimson roses. lachanium.The **Kissing Rose. Perfect for any centrepiece. I shall fetch you as**

many as you need'

He held it out to her, its stem pinched delicately between finger and thumb.

Victoria looked at the flower like it might bite. 'What do you want from me?'

'I want you to **stay here; declared the stranger ardently,`You've no idea how your presence affects me. We feel the touch of evil here too often.**

We feel it and it is contained. How much better to be graced with your presence.Your pure heart and innocence.They are a tonic,Victoria.You're very lovely.You shall have any flowers you wish.Anything you wish.'

`You don't know what you're saying! I don't even know who you are!'

Ì am the Keeper.'

`Keeper? Keeper of what? Of me?'Victoria backed away, words pouring out of her in a stream can't stay here. I don't *want* to stay. I have to go with Jamie - and the Doctor! He'll be leaving soon. He never stops anywhere for very long.We'll all be leaving soon!'

Victoria ran outside, on to the balcony. But the balcony only looked out **on the beach, the already colder air and the swiftly greying skies.**

Jamie ducked again as the Rainbow Knight tried to take the poor boy's 155

head off. For a moment I stood there like a hapless heroine, until I remembered that I was very much the strong-willed, independent type and I grabbed the villain's sword arm before he could make another swing. Seizing his opportunity, Jamie dived in under the Knight's arm and locked him in a hold around the waist. There was a thankfully brief struggle while the two of us wrestled the Knight over the edge.

The Knight broke apart in rainbow shards as he tumbled through the cascading falls. It was really rather beautiful.

`What was that about?! What happened there?!'

I was breathless and didn't know quite what to say. 'It's sort of a gift of

mine! But the illusions generally do what they're told!'

Ìllusions?! You - conjured him up?' Jamie stared over the ledge, then stared at me in disbelief.

I gave a modest shrug. 'Imagination is a powerful tool. Especially mine'

Àye, well, if it's a tool, why can't you control it?'

Ì can't imagine.'

Jamie glowered at me. He was very dashing when he was angry.

`There must be something amiss with the biomatrix!' I realised. 'It's the only possible explanation! The only thing that could mess with my magic!'

`Well, I cannae make head nor tail of you.' Jamie shook his head. 'But it sounds like something the Doctor might understand. We should go and warn him.'

`You're right! Come on!' I grabbed Jamie's hand.

We raced along the ledge, and I for one was suddenly oblivious to the crash of water and the romance of the scene.

Caslandir had always been blessed with an air of the dramatic, with its row of stately villas built into the cliff face high above the beach. Now, boats and ships were drawn up along the shore in preparation for the Festival, and the gathering storm threatened to drag the vessels out to sea before they were ready.The waves were already in an ugly mood, all surly and choppy, and the wind was whipping along the sands. Foul-tempered clouds bore down on the bay and the many Trakenites hurrying to cover the gardens they had laid out in the endangered hulls.

In the midst of the chaos, Victoria ran along the beach, making for the cliff path and, she hoped, the Observatory and the Doctor. Her heart leaped when she spied the Doctor scampering across the sand to meet her. She rushed up and he braked her gently with an embrace.

Òh my, Victoria, what is it?'

Òh, Doctor.There was this man. He said he was the Keeper!' She had to shout to compete with the churning waves and raging wind. But the mention of the Keeper reached a few ears and the Doctor steered Victoria 156

to one side as some of the closer people started to gather.That was

when Victoria noticed the regal dark-haired woman, one of the Consuls - Symia?

- coming up behind the Doctor.

`The Keeper?' the Consul demanded. 'What was the Keeper doing?'

Ì don't know!' wailed Victoria, appealing to the Doctor with wide eyes.

`He scared me, Doctor. He wanted to keep me here.'

`There, you're safe now.'The Doctor laid an affectionate arm around her shoulder. Victoria watched the shadows deepen under his brow. A little more gravel found its way into his voice: 'But the Keeper is interfaced directly with the biomatrix, isn't he? If all this has affected the Keeper, there's no telling what might happen.'

`What sort of things?'Victoria heard the panic in her own voice.

The Doctor contemplated the storm, standing firm as if defying the wind and the brooding gloom.An almighty thunderclap shattered the air, and Victoria huddled closer to the Doctor. As everyone glanced at the heavens, only the Doctor narrowed his eyes in the direction of the cliff path down which he had come.

A second thunderclap shook the ground.Then another.

Something was coming

The Doctor's features, dark and imposing as a granite cliff, were prone to sudden erosion in the face of certain forces. 'Run!' he shouted.

And everybody did.

We spurred our steeds on through an October landscape, the miles flashing by and branches snatching at our sleeves whenever we strayed within reach. Instead of revelling, the tails of my redingote flapped frantically in my wake. Above the rush of wind, I was sure I could hear another sound chasing us and I risked a glance over my shoulder.

Jamie, riding close on my tail, followed my glance, as I glimpsed them: black and white, all grizzly bulk and wolfish snarls. A pack of shadows with mass and teeth, and masses of teeth, on the hunt for us.

`Bandersnatches!' I cried.

`What?!' Poor Jamie's disbelief was not so much suspended as dangling on a bungee cord. 'Yon creatures from your poem?!'

Ì'm afraid so!' I glanced back again. 'Are they frumious?'

Ì don't know! How can ye tell?!'

`Never mind" I kicked with my heels. 'Let's just play it safe and ride faster!'

We galloped on, the sound of fangs snapping at the air behind us.

`Quickly! Everyone inside!'The urgency in the Doctor's voice was, Symia thought, all the more effective for the fact that he sounded as panic-stricken as everybody else. She allowed herself to be herded along the 157

balcony with the rest of them, as they flocked inside their villas and barred their doors against the impossible. The impossible turned stone-cold fact, charging across the beach with great thunderous strides.

Tail thrashing, teeth gnashing, hissing and roaring louder than the storm: the Melkur, come to life. Now who was petrified?

Symia held fast to her reserves of Consular dignity and command, making sure people were safely inside, before heading back to the Doctor and his friend. 'Doctor! What can we do?'

Ì don't know!' Suddenly, the man's note of panic was no longer having the right effect. He looked on, horrified and not a little bit fascinated, as the gigantic statue, scabs of moss and lichen falling from its stony hide, clawed at the end of the balcony.

It snarled and spat savagely, and the girl, Victoria, let out a piercing scream.The creature tore the railing to splinters, stabbed a brace of talons in the decking and, impossibly, started to haul its boulder-heavy frame aloft. Victoria screamed again, but that just seemed to encourage it.

Symia stared, transfixed, denying what she was seeing. Ìt's impossible!'

'I know! There's far too many impossible things happening and I haven't even had breakfast yet!"The Doctor thrust out an arm and coaxed Symia and Victoria back towards the door of the nearest villa. `Get inside, both of you!' He beat a retreat after them, backing up and

never once taking his eyes off the monster.

The monster, the balcony groaning under its clambering mass, returned the compliment all the way up.

When Jamie and I arrived at Caslandir, the storm was lashing the cliffs and the Jabberwock was starkly and vividly sketched in each lightning strike, against the slate and charcoal background of the cliffs. Its jaws were definitely biting and its claws were most assuredly catching as it battered down the door of one of the villas. There wasn't a hint of whiffling or burbling, but its eyes were aflame as, on hearing Jamie and I riding full pelt across the sand, it craned its gargoyle-head around to gauge this fresh prey.

Jamie drew his steed around, as my horse reared and whinnied frantically.A bolt of fear shot down with the very next lightning strike, and paralysed the both of us.

The beast spun its bulk around and launched itself, improbably, off the balcony, to come crunching down on to the sand. Steadying itself, it flexed its dragon-frame around and snapped at the air just inches from yours truly

`Jamie!' I shrieked. (Even strong and independent types are entitled to do that when in this sort of fix.) 'We have to do something!'

Jamie leaped down from his horse, hunting around desperately for a

rock or some sort of weapon. Beaches, though, are rather poor armouries.

`Jamie!' The Doctor appeared on the balcony overhead and tossed something down at Jamie's feet. 'You'll need your vorpal blade!'

Jamie, rather dubiously, picked the fireside poker out of the sand.

Ìmagination!' I hollered. 'It's a powerful tool!'

Jamie gripped the tool with a sudden resolve. Holding it like a claymore, he turned on the advancing beast(ie) like a young warrior.

`Come to my arms, my beamish boy!' I called out and wrapped a battle-weary Jamie in a great big hug. (I just couldn't help myself.) Whereas Victoria, hurrying down the stairs from the balcony, came running over to enfold him in a heartfelt embrace and settled for an

earnest, 'Oh, Jamie!

Thank goodness you're all right!'

The Doctor, trotting down the steps after her, wandered quickly over.

`Yes, well done, Jamie' He eyed the clouds warily, mistrustful of their subdued temperament. The elements had already begun to subside, as though at the monster's death (I'll spare you the gory details) the storm had lost its heart. 'You did brilliantly. But I don't think we're quite ready for the calloo callays. We may have dealt with the effects for now, but there's still the question of cause'

I couldn't help feeling a little dismayed, as the Doctor looked at me.

Òh now, Doctor,' amie came to my defence, `she said it wasnae her and I believe her. She can make things happen, it's true, but she had no control over it'

Ìt's true,' I sighed, apologetically. I'm a Trakenite too, remember.

Something else was affecting me'

`But what?'Victoria searched all our faces. 'What could do all this?'

The Doctor sank into a pensive mire, a finger or two drumming around his mouth and chin.

Above us, footsteps tapped on the balcony. The people were beginning to emerge from their villas. Consul Symia was chief among the faces looking down at us. With a bit of altitude on us, she couldn't help look anything but aloof. But most of the faces up there seemed to be saying much the same: we visitors had outstayed our welcome.

`This *must* have had something to do with one of you'

The Doctor raised his eyes to meet Symia's stern glare. 'But this is all fantasy and superstition.There has to be some *scientific* explanation'

`Maybe there is one, Doctor, but we do not care to know it. We have a finely balanced system here and outsiders introduce too many variables.

Outsiders are better off staying where they belong, out among the stars.

Maybe you will find an answer there'

`Yes, maybe we will' The Doctor bowed his head, looking a little downcast but trying to remain philosophical.

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`Goodbye, Doctor. And you had best tell Neverglade, he and his Observatory should be gone by morning.'

The Doctor glanced up suddenly. Lightning had struck, and this time in a good way. But he was downcast again almost immediately. 'Oh dear,' he said.

Astrology! *Astrology!'* Neverglade was livid.

he stretched the first

syllable to improbable lengths `-possible!'

`But don't you see? It makes perfect sense' The Doctor was at loggerheads with Neverglade, in the centre of the Observatory. I'm sure they would have locked antlers if they'd both had them. The Doctor gestured at the prismatic walls. 'You've a miniature universe locked up in here! And all those emissions, the gravitational forces and quite possibly even planetary motions are filtering out in some form into the local biomatrix! Your miniature stars and planets were starting to interfere with people's lives! Their moods, their feelings! That has to be the answer!'

`Never, Doctor! I will not accept that!'

I nudged Jamie confidentially. 'Oops-a-daisy:

`Shh: Rather sensibly, we were both staying well out of the argument.

Jamie shook his head as the quarrel looked set to go on for some time. He glanced around, as Victoria materialised, popping into existence next to the looking-glass wall.

`Hey,' he grinned, 'what kept you? You're missing the fun and games: Ì had to fmd the Keeper - and apologise,' admitted Victoria coyly. She was twirling a lachanium blossom in her fingers, and she held it up for us to see.'He gave me this.And he kissed my hand. It was all very charming'

She looked even prettier for her blushes. 'It was all just a silly misunderstanding. I suppose we were all affected in some way by this

whole sorry business:

Aye: nodded Jamie ruefully, and jerked his head in the direction of the noisy debate between the Doctor and Neverglade. `Some more than others: We met on the riverbank, far from the madding crowd, as it were, and near to the TARDIS, to say our fond farewells. (Neverglade, old sourpuss that he was, stayed sulking in his Observatory.) Jamie and Victoria had already traded hugs and *au revoirs* with me, and they had headed inside, leaving me with the Doctor.Accompanied by the birdsong and the babbling river.

`They're playing our song again,' I said.

He studied me the way a teacher might study an errant student, before saying *What am I going to do with you?* He didn't; he said, 'I suppose you'll be leaving with Neverglade:

`Yes, we're an inseparable team: I grinned and rocked on my heels. 'I'm a born traveller, Doctor. I need to roam.And I need a companion who can 160

keep whisking me off through time and space. Some company and a means of travel, it's not much to ask for. OK, we do the time bit the slow way.Taking our time about it.And actually, he's not terribly good company, a bit tetchy and serious. Something only a mother could love, but he hasn't got a mother, you see. He's only got me, poor thing.Anyway, he's all right once you get to know him and if you leave him alone long enough to get on with his precious work.'

`You made *him* up, didn't you? He's your imaginary friend?'

`Yes. I made a wish,' I beamed. 'Upon a star. And Neverglade came true.'

`Which one?'

`Mm?'

`Which star did you make your wish upon?'

Àll of them, Doctor.All of them'

The Doctor answered with one of his smiles, that seemed as wide as the heavens and just as full of twinkles He turned and ambled back to the TARDIS and, before I knew it, his ship started making that magical sound, like a hoarse box.Then it vanished.

But of course the Doctor's smile, like the Cheshire Cat's, lingered some considerable time in the air after he was gone.

`*What country, friends, is this?'*

`*This is Illyria, lady'*

And what should I do in Illyria? My brother he is in Elysium.'

Victoria was, of course, thinking of the Doctor and Jamie And her father.

And it was in that moment that I was born. (Although if anyone ever asks my star sign, I tell them Virgo.) A dewdrop tear in her eye, she favoured Mr and Mrs Harris with the bravest of smiles, to show how much she was enjoying the play already.

This, their first outing since Victoria had arrived on their shores, had been proposed by Mr Harris as a means of gently coaxing the young child out of her shell. She had been withdrawn for days in the wake of her friends' departure, and Mrs Harris could only agree that an evening out, as a family, would be the best medicine; though she warned her husband that they must not pressure the poor girl or expect any miracle cures. 'Small doses,' she'd advised, 'that's what's needed' Whereupon Mr Harris had uttered the rather more well-worn, 'Time heals all wounds' But the truth doesn't stop being true just because it's cliched.

Well, of course,Victoria still had a long way to go - at least as far as Jamie and the Doctor had travelled in the meantime. But in that moment, her recovery began.And in that moment, I came into being. Four rows back, and seven seats to the left.

Luckily, the community hall wasn't overly packed that night. Otherwise I might have ended up as an uninvited guest on someone's lap.

And the commotion might have turned Victoria's head, distracted her from the delightfully fresh and wonderfully amateur performers on stage.

And caught sight of me, framed, as it were, in the spotlight of her heart.At which point, I would have had no choice but to wink knowingly and make a gracious exit.

As it was, things worked out wonderfully, and she carried on watching the play, none the wiser. Her thoughts were a whirl of many things, a gypsy dance of deep laments and dizzying heights. But it never occurred to her that she was, in a sense, a mother.

The Keeper had given her a piece of his mind In the stars, he had foreseen an inkling of the future and in a gem of the Source, he had presented Victoria with his gift. A part of Traken that might outlive his beloved Union, and a part of Victoria that might continue her adventures, ranging through all time and space, long after she had parted company with her dear Doctor. The corner of her heart that would remain among the stars. In a word, me.

Happy that she was on her way to being happy, I watched up until the last act and stood to go before the final curtain. Actually, to be honest, I was itching to be on my way and kick off my adventures as soon as possible. So with one last look at Victoria, bathed in the spillage of illumination from the footlights, I bowed out, just before the end.

Which, curiously enough, is where my story really begins.

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CALLIOPE

The Muse of Epic Poetry and Rhetoric

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Katarina in the Underworld

Steve Lyons

I

She remembered feeling cold. *So cold. Colder than she had felt before.*

An old woman stood in her path. She had grey hair, tied behind her head, and she wore a simple tunic. She waited, but the old woman did not move. Silly cow, what was she doing?

She could not open her eyes. They felt as if they were frosted shut. She tried to breathe, but the aching coldness filled her chest.

The old woman kept nagging her, expecting an answer to her impossible question. She felt frustrated, resentful. She ought to have walked on, drifted through the harridan, but that would have been

rude Instead, she stood, helpless and confused, and waited for her to move away. She was probably new here, she thought. She didn't understand.

She remembered: *A hand on her shoulder. Weeping with relief as the gods' messenger took her from that dark place. She sobbed:7 was afraid you would not find me, so far from home.'*

She wanted to forget the old woman's question, but she could not chase it from her head.

She was led back to the world, which she had thought she would not see again. The messenger took her to a secret cave, and they climbed down through a great fissure in the earth. They passed the White Rock and the Gates of the Sun, as majestic as she had dreamed they would be. How could she have forgotten?

And suddenly, in those distant memories, she found the answer to the old woman's question. It welled in her throat, until she was forced to release it with a voice she had thought lost.

`Katarina; she said. Ì am called Katarina.'

`What do you see,' asked the old woman, 'when you look at them?'

They had walked beneath the overcast sky, across the dead earth from which sprouted only a few sickly, white flowers. The air was hot and heavy, pressing in on them.They sat at the base of the great elm, ignoring the dismal shadows that drifted around them. When first she had come here, Katarina had spent many hours in silence, staring up at the batlike Oneiroi, which clung to the elm's spreading branches. She knew that the dreams they embodied were often false, but she had found comfort in them anyway. In time, however, the dreams had died.As she had begun to fade, so too had the Oneiroi become transparent to her. She had wandered away from the tree, and forgotten its promises.

The dreams lived for her again, now. Something about the old woman had reawakened that part of her. Perhaps it was simply that she had taken the trouble to acknowledge her existence.

I... see the life I once lived. I see my mistress, the High Priestess Cassandra. She was a good mistress. She treated me well, but I... was an unfaithful servant.'

'How were you unfaithful, Katarina?' asked the old woman, kindly.

'I questioned my orders. I was idle: White wings fluttered between the leaves. 'I was charged with the care of the sacred doves, and I neglected them. One of the birds died:

'All creatures die, Katarina. Perhaps it could not have been prevented.'

She shook her head, firmly. 'The dove was taken by the gods, to punish me. I would not accept my station. I was bitter. I believed myself meant for better things: She looked up again, and saw herself at Zeus's right hand, basking in his favour. She gasped at the image: her worst desires manifested for, she felt, all to see. She tore her gaze away.'It is my hubris that has brought me to this place, that condemns me to wander Asphodel forevermore:

`Your mistress had you killed?'

`No, although she foresaw my death' She felt her cheeks colouring in shame, and for a moment, she could say no more. She did not know why she had said so much already. 'I_ I was afraid. I fled the world itself, to escape her wrath'

The old woman leaned closer, her eyes alight with interest.

`There was an old man, with silver hair and a cane. He had a temple. I thought him a god, to begin with. It is a measure of my pride, that I believed a god would acknowledge me. His temple... it was a gateway to other realms. I stepped through its portal, and I felt as if...' She fumbled for the words. She did not understand half of what had happened to her, in those final days. 'I thought it was my time, then. I thought I had come to this place:

And yet, you say, this white-haired man was no god?'

`He swore otherwise. He had me call him "Doctor"'

The old woman rolled the word on her tongue, and frowned.

`His servant had lost her heart to another,' recalled Katarina. `The Doctor was a kind man He gave her to Troilus, leaving him short of a handmaiden'

`You gave your life for him.'

'I was honoured to serve him.And yet...' She faltered

`You fear you did not serve well?' The old woman seemed able to see into her heart. Or perhaps it was just that her thoughts had been writ plain on her face. 'This Doctor must have been a rich man, to own such a grand temple. And yet, he could not spare a coin to see his handmaiden across the river?'

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'It matters not,' said Katarina. Èven were I to pay Charon's fare, it would be a wasted journey. I know what would await me at the dividing road.'

The Doctor's face smiled down at her, formed by the Oneiroi. But, as she watched, his thin lips tightened and his head acquired a haughty tilt. 'I must have displeased him.The Doctor's world was strange to me. I did not always know what I should do. I know I tested his patience.'

`Tell me more of this Doctor's world:

Katarina nodded, obediently. 'We were journeying to the Place of Perfection, but there were terrible creatures in our path. They had glistening shells, and they spat fire. Their voices were like the bark of Cerberus.The Doctor called them... "dar-licks":

'I have not heard of such beings.'

`He had fought them before. He had triumphed over them'

'He sounds like a remarkable man'

'He was,' she said, smiling at the memory:I am privileged to have known him, for however short a time'

The old woman nodded, and for a moment, she was lost in thoughts of her own. Then she climbed to her feet, and Katarina did the same.As her hand touched the rough bark of the elm, she realised that she had become fully solid. The old woman circled the tree trunk, and finally stopped and called up into its branches: Phantasos, I have a task for you! I would have you deliver a message to your father, in his silent sanctuary: A shape detached itself from the leaves. It landed on the old woman's shoulder, a collage of shifting images, and she spoke in its ear.

Katarina watched, agape, as the dream took flight, its insubstantial form fading into the gloom. The old woman turned to her with a warm smile.

Ì hope the Oneiros will be able to rouse Hypnos. He was always the laziest of us.'

She knew now who the old woman had to be, although she could scarcely believe it. She wrestled with her pride, afraid to admit that she was favoured, after all. She told herself that this crone did in no way resemble the fair young woman of legend. But was it not the case that a goddess could alter her aspect?

'I must go now,' said the old woman. 'I have my grove to tend - but I thank you, Katarina, for sharing your tale with a foolish old woman. I wish you good fortune in the trials to come:

She hobbled away, and Katarina stared after her - until, recovering her senses, she gasped in horror at the disrespect she had inadvertently shown. She hurried after the old woman, intending to prostrate herself at her feet, to beg forgiveness.

But, among the aimless, shifting phantoms, she could not find her again.

* *

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In time, she began to lose substance once more. Her mind clouded, and her meeting with the old woman became another false dream in her memory. She accepted, at last, that she was no better than the other residents of these fields, and she prepared to rejoin them.

She did not know the voice at first, though it sounded familiar to her.

She was not even sure why she had stopped to listen to it, as she had forgotten her name again. But she recognised the figure who came bumbling towards her, leaning on his walking cane, clad in his dark coat of strange fabric. 'Doctor!'

Òh, my dear, Katarina, I thought I had... I thought you were... what is this dreadful place?'

`You do not know?'

Òf course I don't know, child: said the Doctor, testily 'or else I would hardly have asked, would I? I was in my bed, and now I wake to find myself in this... this...'

Òh, Doctor, I wish I were not the one to tell you this, but you must have passed in your sleep.'

Ì must have...?' His eyes widened, and he spluttered: 'I did no such thing, I assure you. I would have...' He looked around with jerky, anxious motions, then shook his head furiously. 'No, no, no, this is not right .at all.

This is not what I...' He turned back to Katarina, and suddenly his frown melted into a bittersweet smile. He reached out to her, placing his hands on her shoulders. I think I see what has happened here. Yes, yes, I think I see... We are neither of us where we are supposed to be, my child.'

Ì do not understand.

`What are you doing here, on this barren plain, among these wretched souls, hmm? Your gods must offer a better reward for a lifetime of service.'

`There is nothing more,' she insisted. 'Not for such as me.'

`Poppycock!' snapped the Doctor. 'You are as deserving as...' His voice tailed off, his hand moving to his mouth as a thought occurred to him.

The river back there... yes, yes, yes, I should have thought. You need coins -' He rummaged through his pockets, and his expression became chagrined.'- and I'm afraid I have none.'

Ìt is kind of you to think of me, Doctor, but I -'

He wagged an admonishing finger. 'You are not to give up yet, Katarina.

I forbid it, absolutely forbid it!'

`But the ferryman, Charon, he will not -'

`You leave this Charon fellow to me: The Doctor had become stern with purpose. 'I am to blame for landing you in this fix. I will do whatever it takes to get you out of it' She opened her mouth to argue, but he repeated, more firmly: 'Whatever it takes!'

He drew Katarina to his side. She felt humbled by his display of affection. She almost believed his promise. She almost believed that he 168

could take her to the very gates of Elysium. But it was the gods' wish, she reminded herself, that she remain here.

And not even the Doctor could defy the gods.

II

They followed the course of the Acheron, keeping pace with its sluggish waters. Katarina looked mournfully into the muddy river, knowing that it could never be swum. Had she tried, she would only have been dragged into its bottomless depths.

The river vomited its contents into a lake. From the west, the roiling lava stream of the Pyriphlegethon also crashed into this misty pool. A line of newly arrived souls had formed at the lake's edge, and, with a hint of impatience, the Doctor guided Katarina to its rear. In front of them was a muscular warrior, wearing a breastplate of copper; before him, an elderly man hi the fine robes of a priest. She felt out of place, unworthy, wrapped in her simple chiton as befitted her status.

She heard the swishing of a paddle in the water, and a distant light grew in the fog.A thrill of anticipation ran through the waiting passengers, but Katarina felt only a sick fear. Soon, a small wooden boat glided into view, an ancient lantern lighting its way. She shrank to the Doctor's side. Charon was as intimidating as she remembered: an old man, and stooped, but his eyes were like fire. His nose was crooked, his thick beard uneven and filthy.

The short line began to move. Passengers stepped into the boat, handing over the coins that loved ones had placed beneath their tongues.

Charon took them eagerly, vanishing them into his tattered cloak. When the Doctor's turn came, he squared up to the ferryman, throwing his head back and clutching his lapels. 'My good man,' he orated, 'I require passage for myself and my young friend here.'

Charon shot him an evil glare, and responded in a scratchy voice: 'The fare is two obols:

Àh, yes, yes indeed, but I'm sure we can reach an accommodation, hmm?'

Charon turned his back. 'Two obols:

Now, listen here, my -'The Doctor placed one foot on the boat, and a

hand on Charon's shoulder.The ferryman spun round, his eyes flaring, and the Doctor recoiled and fell back on to the bank. 'What I mean to say is,'

he blustered, raising his hands in a placatory gesture, Ì am a man of not inconsiderable means. I simply... now, how can I put this?... I'm afraid I came here quite unexpectedly. And the problem is, you see, that I neglected to arrange the proper payment for your services.' He patted himself down in search of something to support his claim. His eyes 169

alighted upon a ring that he wore on his right hand. A large blue stone glittered in its setting, and the Doctor appeared to think twice before concluding that he had no choice. He slipped the band from his finger.

`Show me!' urged Charon, greedily.The Doctor pressed the blue-stoned ring into his grimy hand, and he held it up and squinted at it. 'Yes, yes, an interesting trinket. For this, I may be persuaded to take one soul across the water:

Ì beg your pardon, sir!' The Doctor snatched back the offering. 'A

"trinket"? This ring, as you well know, has value enough to pay your fare a thousand times over.'

`That may be,' leered Charon, cracked lips peeling back from rotting teeth. He leaned closer to the Doctor, so close that even Katarina could smell his oily breath,`But the fare is to be paid in coins, and naught else. I may make an exception for one soul; never for two:

The Doctor returned his glare fearlessly, but the ferryman was steadfast.

`Very well,' he sighed, turning to indicate his companion. 'Very well. The ring, if you will take the child.'

`No, Doctor!' cried Katarina. `You must not sacrifice your immortality for my sake:

`Do not argue with me, girl,' he reproached heel am sacrificing nothing.

I can still leave this place, I hope, the way I came in - but you cannot.You must go forwards' He relented, his expression softening. 'I only wish I could come with you, help you, but you heard -'

No!' They turned, startled by Charon's interjection. The old ferryman was glaring at Katarina, his face creased with hatred. 'There is no seat in my boat for her!' He hissed, and swiped at her with filthy, overgrown fingernails. She leapt back with a squeal.

`What... what...?' stammered the Doctor. 'I don't understand. What is the matter here?'

Charon had already pushed off from the bank. 'I would not carry her kind,' he snarled as he floated away on the water, Tor all the riches in Olympus. She has the stench of the unburied about her. She is unclean; *unclean,* I say!'

The Doctor held Katarina until her tears subsided. 'My dear' he said, 'I don't know how to... I can't apologise enough for... When we lost you, you see, your body drifted out into space. I didn't know how to retrieve it. And the Daleks were searching for the core of their blessed time destructor, and... and I'm afraid I let you down, child.Yes, I let you down.'

`No, Doctor,' she sniffed, wiping her eyes on her sleeve. 'It was not your fault. I knew what would happen to me if I pressed that button: And yet, still you pressed it: She nodded sadly, taking the Doctor's words as an accusation. `My dear, dear child,' he sighed, 'my dear Katarina, 170

you are more precious to me than you can ever understand. And that is why we must not give up, do you hear me? I failed you in life; I ought to have taken better care of you. I will not fail you again, on that you have my solemn oath. I will see you to your Place of Perfection yet:

`But how can that be,' she wailed, ìf we cannot cross the river?'

`Patience, child,' said the Doctor, `there is always a way, if we just take the time to look for it.' To himself, more fiercely, he added: 'There must be a way!'

When Charon next returned, the Doctor was waiting.

The ferryman saw Katarina, behind her master, and he snarled at her. His eyes made her feel dirty inside. 'What do you want this time?' he spat at the Doctor:Have you decided to accept my offer? Leave the girl, and I will ferry you now to the Plain of Judgement.'

Ì have not changed my mind, sir,' said the Doctor imperiously. Rather,

I intend to appeal to your reason. My young friend -'

`She is unclean. She will not set foot in my boat!'

`What must I do, hmm? There must be some price I can pay, some task I may perform...' The Doctor gripped the ferryman's arms and stared up into his blazing eyes. 'If you only knew my friend... Katarina is a special case, a very special case indeed. I ask you, I beg of you, to make an exception for her.'

Charon's only response was a dismissive snort. He tried to shrug off the Doctor's grip, but it was more tenacious than he had expected.A flurry of hands, a swish of his cloak, and the unwanted passenger retreated.Turning away, Charon bent to retrieve his paddle. But, before his hand touched it, he stiffened and turned back, eyes narrowed in fury. 'You... you...' he spluttered, you have taken my gold!'

`Have I indeed?' the Doctor beamed. 'Or perhaps it is simply that you have not been as careful with your possessions as you imagined.'

Charon stepped on to the bank, and advanced on him:Give it to me, old man, or I will tear the skin from your bones!' His dirty fingernails slashed through the air.

The Doctor backed away from him, luring him away from the boat.Then he straightened his back, and his expression became stern:Not so fast, my friend! I have something, now, that you want, have I not? And I am prepared to make a bargain with you.' He opened his hand, and Katarina gasped to see the pile of coins that glittered in his palm.

Charon roared, and threw himself at the thief. His eyes bulging, the Doctor brought up his cane to protect himself. Charon seized his wrist and twisted it, but the Doctor managed a flick, which shot the coins into the air. They showered around the two men, and plopped into the soft mud at the lake's edge. With a tormented howl, Charon fell to his knees 171

and scrabbled for them in the dirt. The Doctor sidled past him, making frenzied motions toward Katarina with his hands. She had much to say, but the Doctor put a silencing finger to his lips.

They jumped into the boat, and he picked up the paddle and sank it into the turbid water. As they drifted slowly out on to the lake, Charon turned and saw them. 'Doctor!' squealed Katarina, covering

her mouth and pointing.The Doctor had already seen him, and he put all his strength into another stroke, propelling them faster away. For a second, Katarina thought it would be enough - she thought they were safe - but then, the old ferryman took a prodigious leap and flew toward them. She screamed.

He almost reached the boat. He crashed into the water on his stomach, creating a wave that threatened to capsize them.As the Doctor struggled to keep afloat, Charon's gnarled fingers clawed at wood, and he tried to drag himself over the backward-pointing prow. Katarina cringed from him.The Doctor thrust the paddle into her hand and lashed out with his cane. Charon gave a guttural cry as he was assaulted, snatching away his stung hands. And, suddenly, he was gone. Katarina's heartbeat filled her ears, and she looked this way and that, expecting him to emerge from the water behind her and drag her overboard.

The ferryman's lantern lay, still burning, in the bottom of the boat, and the Doctor lifted it to survey their surroundings. He put an arm around Katarina's shoulder, and pointed to the bank from which they had pushed off. A scrawny figure was hauling itself out of the water. She stared at it, until the mist closed in around them and it could be seen no more.

`There, there,' smiled the Doctor. 'We're safe now, you see? He can't reach us'

`How can we be safe?' she wailed. Tor this, we will be cast into Tartarus'

`Now, now, my dear, you weren't to know what I was planning, were you? Well, then.You are entirely blameless. And you mustn't worry about me; I can make my peace with my own gods, when the time comes'

I... will try to believe that, lord. I will try to have faith'

Eh

? What is...? I thought we were past this silliness, child. I am not your lord'

Ànd yet you have overcome Charon, the son of Darkness and Night!'

Ì simply exploited his weakness, Katarina.A common failing, in his case: greed. Now, will you get it into your head, once and for all, that

I am no more a god than you are.'

She nodded. Ìf you say it is so, then I must accept it. But I wish it were not true - for now we are surely doomed' The mist had enveloped them, cold and damp.Their simple wooden boat was starting to sway on the water.

Òur course must take us through the Stygian Marsh,' said Katarina, àndfrom thence on to the River of Hate herself. Styx will not forgive us our trespass. She will not let us cross'

III

Ìt is hopeless,' lamented Katarina. `There is no way through. We must turn back!'

Three times, she had waited at the edge of the lake for Charon. Each time, his light had emerged from the fog within moments. She had begun to think his journey could not be a long one. She had been wrong.

Firstly, there had been the lost souls in the water, pleading for absolution.To the Doctor's disapproval, she had reached out to them. Her hand had passed through theirs. They had not sinned against her; it was not in her gift to forgive them. Wailing, they had been swept away, back to their homes in Tartarus.

They had come to the marsh, then. Katarina, in deference to the Doctor's age, had insisted on rowing, while he sought out a safe path by lantern light. Her arms were good and strong from her work at the Temple; but still the mud threatened to suck the paddle from her hands.

Her companion had pointed out the lights that glimmered in the mist around them. She had implored with him not to follow them. 'They are false beacons, set to lead us into peril'

`Yes, yes, I know that,' he had assured her.`But they can still be useful to us, if we accept their nature.All we have to do, my dear, is steer into the darkness, and we should be safe. Quite safe!' He had chuckled at his own cleverness.

`But there is a great deal of darkness,' she had pointed out, glumly.

'Of course there is a way through,' he said, now. 'Charon must know it, and we can find it. We shall just have to trust to a certain amount of fortune. Oh, don't look so worried, child. I have found my way out of prettier pickles than this, let me tell you'

Ì have faith in you, Doctor.'

Ì am glad to hear it. Hold on to that faith, child. If you believe in me, there is nothing we cannot achieve. Nothing!'

The cold wave hit her like a slap. She would have shrieked, had her breath not been taken. She had tried to be brave. She had tried to believe in the Doctor - and, as they had wound their way out of that swamp at last, the mist fading around them, she had thought her faith justified. But now, her worst fear had come to pass. The River of Hate had set herself against them.

`Trust me,' the Doctor hissed in her ear, as he stripped off his coat, knotted one arm about her waist and the other to the boat's plank seat.

`Hold on to me. We can get through this!'

The paddle had been snatched from Katarina's hands. She had almost been pitched overboard, but the Doctor had been there, as always. She

clung to him as they were lashed by vengeful waters. She feared they would be overturned - but, despite its apparent simplicity, Charon's boat was sturdy and perfectly balanced.The Doctor was right, she thought.This punishment could not last. Styx would have to deliver them to her far bank or spit them out into Oceanus soon.

But then, against all nature, the river reversed her course. She was playing with them.

Katarina was in the water before she knew it. She had spied the river bank, for a tantalising second, before it was snatched away. When the Doctor had yelled at her to jump, she had obeyed instinctively. She was in Styx's clutches, and the river tried to claim her, forcing bitter tendrils into her nose and mouth. She had lost all sense of direction, but the Doctor guided her. In turn, she helped him when he floundered.

This close to her edge, Styx was shallow and weak, and they had the strength of desperation. Katarina hauled herself, gasping and

spluttering, on to land.The Doctor, unable to follow, flailed and sank. His cane wavered above the surface, and she took it and pulled him to safety.

For some time, neither of them could speak. They lay in the mud, coughing and spluttering. Katarina's long black hair, of which she had been so proud, was filthy and matted, her chiton plastered to her skin.The Doctor had lost his coat, of course, and she had kicked off her sandals in the water. But they had made it. They had crossed the river. Katarina felt elated.

A sound came to them on the thin breeze.A keening howl. The Doctor raised himself on to his elbows, and looked around with beady eyes.

`What... what on earth was that?'

She did not move. `Cerberus; she whispered, reverently.

This side of the water looked no different to the other. The same white flowers dotted the same dark earth, hot and rough between Katarina's bare toes. A well-trodden path crossed the plain, and whenever she was tempted to stray from it, she found that some invisible force confined her to its boundaries.

The great beast squatted in the path's centre. He was dozing, but his noses twitched at their approach, and three of his eyes flickered open.

The beast raised himself to his feet, looming over them. He was just as Cassandra had described him: a gigantic, black, three-headed hell-hound, three mouths flecked with foam, his mane a writhing mass of snakes.

Cerberus beat the ground with the strong, lithe tail of a serpent, and Katarina turned her gaze from him, lest fear freeze her to the spot. She tried to remember what she had been taught. The hell-hound fed on raw flesh, but he would not attack unless provoked. Hades had placed him here to guard against souls leaving his realm, not entering it.

She felt the reassuring squeeze of the Doctor's hand around hers. She trusted him to protect her. They skirted a black leg, thick as the columns that held up the Temple back home.

She screamed, as the hell-hound lashed out at them.

Katarina tried, instinctively, to hide behind the Doctor. He backed into her, and they almost fell. They clung on to each other as a set of knife-sharp teeth clashed an inch above them. She felt hot breath on her cheek, and recoiled from a strong meat stench. The Doctor let out a startled exclamation, and swung his cane.The dog's second head was repelled by a sharp rap to its nose, but the beast was not hurt, only further enraged.

`Well, don't just stand there, child,' cried the Doctor, 'back the way we came Go on, hurry!'

He was already backing away, keeping her behind him The third head swooped, and he reacted with surprising speed and energy. Cerberus howled with three throats, rocking back on to his hind legs, as the walking

cane was lodged vertically between his jaws.

Katarina and the Doctor ran, spurred on by the sharp crack of splintering wood.

Charon was waiting at the river. Styx must have returned his boat to him, or the gods had fashioned him a new one. Katarina didn't want to approach him, at first, but she was more afraid of the roars of the hell-hound behind her.

They passed the ferryman's latest consignment of souls, tramping their way toward judgement. Charon's blackened teeth stretched into a leering grin as he saw them. The Doctor tried to square up to him, but he cut a pitiful, bedraggled figure. He was panting and moaning through exhaustion, and he dabbed at his forehead with a white handkerchief.

The ferryman laughed: a hard, spiteful bark,`This, then, is the reward for your treachery. I knew, as soon as I smelt you, that Cerberus would not let you pass. Oh, he will not venture this close to the river, you are safe here

- but approach him again, and he will feed on your soul.'

`Please!' The Doctor could not speak for himself, so Katarina stepped forward, although her legs shook. Charon scowled at her, contemptuously.

`Please,' she said, 'my friend's only crime is that he wished to help me. We shouldn't have taken your boat, I know, but we were driven to

desperation, and now... my lord, can you find it in your heart to forgive us? I will stay here, I accept my fate, but return the Doctor to the far side of the river, I beg you. Grant me this boon, and I will do anything you desire.'

Àll I require of you,' spat Charon, 'is that you go forward to the dividing road, for we both know what awaits you there:

`But... but Cerberus...'

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The Doctor, almost recovered now, laid a paternal hand on her shoulder.

`The beast, if I deduce correctly, has no quarrel with you. I am the one to whom he took offence.'

`Have you not seen it yet?' cackled Charon. 'The old man does not belong here. But it is here that he will stay, confined to this dismal stretch of mud for eternity'

He pushed off from the bank, but even as his boat disappeared into the gloom, still his malicious laughter echoed around them.

`Then ' stammered Katarina, turning to the Doctor. 'Then, you did not die?'

His face had creased into a scowl, the fingers of one hand playing across his mouth. Disturbed from his thoughts, he reacted irritably. 'Didn't I try to tell you? This... this woman you told me about, somehow she must have arranged to bring me here.'

`Hypnos!' Katarina remembered. 'The old woman sent a message to Hypnos, the God of Sleep. He must have entered your dreams. But... then, surely it is the gods' wish that I reach the Plain of Judgement, for why else would they have sent you to me?'

`You heard what the ferryman said. Nothing prevents you from going on.'

Ì will not leave you,' she said firmly. 'If you must stay here, then so will The Doctor's eyes twinkled, and he put an arm around her. 'I think we can do better than that, my dear. No, no, this Cerberus fellow, this creature, he must have a weakness, just as the ferryman did. Honey and cake, if I remember my classical texts correctly. Honey

and cake!'

`You have such things?'

`Well...' The Doctor's face fell. 'No. No, I don't. But I'm sure we'll think of something.'

Ì do not understand,' said Katarina. 'How shall we defeat the hell-hound with a simple tube - and one so short? Do you hope it will lodge in his throat?'

They had neared Cerberus several times. Each time, they had found him sleeping - but, no matter how quiet their approach, no matter how they had disguised their scents with water and mud, he had always woken.

They had always been forced to run.

`No, no, of course not,' replied the Doctor, distractedly. He was sitting cross-legged on the ground, using the gemstone in his ring to slice into a hollow marsh reed. 'That infernal dog will not be swallowing anything of mine, not if I have a say in the matter. Now...' He held up the reed to his eyes, and inspected it critically. He had cut it down to a length of less than half an inch, open at both ends. He put it to his lips, and blew down it.

A whistle?' guessed Katarina. And yet, it makes no sound: Òh, it makes a sound, I assure you,' said the Doctor. It's just that neither you nor I can hear it.' He blew down the reed again, and there came an answering howl from across the plain.

The Doctor smiled to himself.

IV

They waited an interminably long time on that river bank. Katarina felt she may have faded again, had it not been for the Doctor. He was a solid anchor to her self, a hope to hold on to.

He had picked more reeds from their clothing, cutting and tangling them to produce an elaborate construct that bobbed on the surface of the Styx. He was forcing the water through a valve, he had explained, driving air ahead of it. Katarina hadn't understood, but she had nodded dutifully, aware of his wont to insist that his sorcery was

natural, even mundane.All she needed to know was that the silent whistle now sounded continuously.

At first, she had been frightened by Cerberus's constant howls. She had expected him to come in search of the siren that denied him rest. But Charon had been right. Whether by choice or through some manner of enchantment, the hell-hound did not approach them - and, eventually, she had grown accustomed to his increasingly doleful baying. It was only when the Doctor fished his reed device out of the river, and turned to her with a gleam in his eye and a silencing finger to his lips, that she realised it had ceased.

They tiptoed past the slumbering beast, although Katarina's heart beat so hard that she felt it would betray them.The twitch of a black nose froze her to the spot, but Cerberus did not stir, although the snakes on his back hissed and spat venom at the intruders. Exhausted, he had fallen into the deepest of sleeps. The Doctor urged his companion on, and she allowed herself hope as they stepped over the hell-hound's serpent tail and found their way clear before them.

As the first head woke, they broke into a run. Cerberus tried to stand, but he had control over only two of his legs. He barked loudly, to rouse his sleeping brains. By the time he came bounding after his prey, they had gained much ground - but still, Katarina feared it would not be enough.

She almost fainted with relief when, abruptly, the pursuit ceased.The great beast reared up behind them, roaring furiously, as if brought up short by an invisible leash.

They walked on, the path leading them through crowded fields where dwelt magical beasts and many more hollow-eyed phantoms. They

traversed the Vale of Mourning, where Katarina felt a sympathetic pain for those consumed by unrequited love. Further on, the resentment of the unjustly executed washed over her, like a physical force. Most grievous of all, though, was that part of Limbo reserved for the souls of children. She tried to convince herself that they were not suffering: it was only pride that caused her to fear the loss of her own identity.

She spied a handsome, blond-haired Centaur with lustrous black fur, and this cheered her a little. She also met the gaze of a Gorgon, her heart jumping before she realised that it could no

longer petrify her. She warned the Doctor not to look in its direction.

They came to the dividing road, at last, its right fork leading beneath the Palace of Hades to Elysium, its left down to Tartarus and eternal punishment at the hands of the Erinyes. Ahead of them was a grassy meadow, in which stood a stout stone table. When Katarina saw the three men behind it - each of them aged and bearded, clad in black robes - her legs froze and she could walk no further. It was only with the Doctor's encouragement that she was able to approach them, to step on to the Plain of Judgement.

She should have warned him He was waiting, behind her, expecting all **to be fine.** He had done so much for her. She ought to have made him see that it would all be in vain.

She recognised the Judges of the Dead, once mortals themselves. She had seen their images in a tapestry:Aeacus, former King of Aegina; Minos, **who had ruled Crete and was the greatest of them; and Minos's brother, Rhadamanthys. They regarded Katarina sternly as she trembled in their presence.They did not speak. Resting on the table before them was a set of golden scales; beside this, three dusty books, bound in leather, in which she knew** all the deeds of her life were recorded.Taking one book each, the Judges began to read in silence. Occasionally, one **of the** old men would produce a small, smooth pebble from his robes and drop it on to the scales, into one basin or the other.

For **a long time, the only sounds were the crackling of old pages turning, and the clinking of the stones. Katarina squirmed. She looked back at the Doctor, and tried to return his smile, but she could not twist her lips** into the required position.

More pebbles were placed. If she squinted at them, she could make out scenes from her life, playing across their surfaces. In the left-hand basin, the one that weighted the scales toward Tartarus, she saw her neglect of Cassandra's dove, and **the time she had fallen asleep** in the Temple. She saw the **resentful thought she had once harboured toward King Priam, when she had felt that he had not appreciated her work. But then, mounting on the good side, were the pebbles representing each day of** faithful service, and they greatly outnumbered the bad.

For a moment, she foolishly hoped it might be enough. She prayed that the gods might have forgiven their wayward servant. But then, Minos closed his book and glared directly at her, and she could see the condemnation in his eyes. It was he who placed the final stone: a pebble bigger and blacker than all the others.

Katarina's hand flew to her mouth as the scales tipped briefly toward Tartarus. She held her breath as they tilted back the other way. When, at last, they reached an equilibrium, the basins were perfectly level. She thought about the fate that awaited her, and her heart grew heavy. She bowed her head, tears stinging the insides of her eyes, and whispered hoarsely: Th-thank you, my Lords...' She hardly dared turn, didn't want to face the Doctor.

He was confused.'What... what happened? Was that... have they made a decision? Tell me, my child -' he jabbed a finger toward the scales - 'what is the meaning of this... these...?'

Judgement has been passed,' said Katarina quietly, staring at the ground.

` My soul has been found neither good nor evil:

`Neither...?' he spluttered. 'How could they have...?'

'I am to remain here,' she said, trying not to sound sorrowful:I will take my place in the fields, among the others who have... who sinned as I did.'

`You mean to say that, after all we have been through, you are no better off than...? No! No, I will not accept that!'

To Katarina's horror, the Doctor made for the Judges' table. 'No,' she cried, 'please! There has been no mistake. I knew this would happen. I tried to tell you, but you would not...' His eyes flashed, and she swallowed and changed tack. 'It is my fault, Doctor. I can never be allowed into the Elysian Fields, for I... I... I died by my own hand:

He bristled. 'But, my dear, that is preposterous! How can they not see...?' He decided, abruptly, that he was talking to the wrong person. She could not stop him, this time, as he marched up to the Judges. 'How can you not see that this young woman has done more good in her life than...? Excuse me, are you listening to a word I...?'The Doctor brought his hand down on the stone table, with a resounding slap. He had the Judges' attention, now He straightened his back, and looked down his nose at them. 'Now, see here, my good fellows, there has

been -'

His lips continued to move, but no sound emerged. It took him a moment to realise that he had been struck dumb. He stiffened, his eyes wide, his nostrils flaring indignantly.

Katarina pulled at his sleeve. 'Please, do not make more trouble on my account. I am not worth it: He rounded on her, but his protest was inaudible. Perhaps, she thought, it was better that way. It was time she had her say. 'Listen to me, Doctor. You have tried your best, and I am grateful for that. You have risked so much for my sake - but you should feel no 179

obligation towards me.You taught me so much in our short time together, and I cherish those lessons. If I could have my life over again, I would make the same choices. You do not need to feel guilty. There is nothing you can do for me now I am in the hands of the gods, and I bow to their judgement.

The Doctor had given up trying to argue, but he gave no sign that he accepted her decision. He smiled tightly, as Katarina carried a soft kiss to his lips on her finger. 'I am not to be punished, Doctor. I will not suffer. I have simply done naught to deserve a reward. I will rejoin the phantoms, and become oblivious as I was before. But, thanks to you, I have crossed the river, at least. Now, there is hope that, one day, I may bathe in the waters of the Lethe. I will cleanse my soul, and return to the world in a new form. I feel sure, however, that I will not forget you. I will always remember your kindness. I... I will pray that you find your way home.'

She turned from him, before her tears could brim on to her cheek. She stepped off the path, knowing that he could not follow her. She did not look back as she hurried away from him.

She felt cold and alone, but she knew that such feelings would not last.

Katarina took a deep, shuddering breath and prepared, once more, to surrender everything she had been.

She could not step on to the road, at first. The white-haired man - who could not step off it - had to drag her to his side. She was still not sure who he was. She did not know why he had called to her, nor where they were. He was gripping her shoulders, shaking her, urging her to remember.

`D-Doctor... I thought you... I thought you'd left...'

Ì am going nowhere, young lady. Not until you remember who you are.

Your name is Katarina. Katarina! Say it with me!'

Òh, Doctor, I said...'

Ì heard what you said, child, and don't think it was not appreciated: He was propelling her along a long, straight road, her surroundings a blur to her. 'But it is my turn to speak now, and I have a great deal left to say. A great deal!'

`Where are you taking me?'

She saw the building ahead of them, filling her field of view. She saw the harpies wheeling about its great turrets, and her jaw fell in awed recognition. 'You can't... oh, Doctor, the palace... we must not...'

'If those Judges of yours won't listen; he asserted,`then we shall have to find somebody who will, won't we? It is time we presented your case to the highest authority!'

V

`WHO ARE YOU,' rumbled Hades, 'THAT YOU DARE INTRUDE IN MY HOME?' His tone, like his expression, was mild, but his vast power smouldered behind his words.

Katarina threw herself at his feet, hurting her knees on the white marble flooring. The Doctor was taken aback, too, but he would not prostrate himself. He faced this god, the very brother of Zeus, as an equal, but stumbled over his words. Ì... I... who I am is of no importance. What should concern you, rather, is the injustice meted out to my young friend here' He indicated Katarina, and she felt her stomach knotting, as it had when they had first stepped into the palace. She had hesitated, at first, but the Doctor had turned back to her with a sympathetic smile, a hand extended, and she had known then that she would follow him anywhere.

The sound of music and laughter had lured them to this great hall, with its exquisite sculptures, its gilt-framed portraits and its velvet drapes hanging from fluted archways. A grand staircase swept down

into the centre of the room, guarded by Griffins. Hades was entertaining favoured spirits: those who had been warriors and kings in the world above.They had exchanged bawdy tales as they suckled on the dark red juice of black pomegranates, the fruit of the dead. Katarina had felt conspicuous, sure that these great men would see her for what she was and turn upon her.

The Doctor, however, had elbowed his way through the crowd, enquiring in vain after the whereabouts of their host.

There was no music, now.

Ì have urgent business with the master of this land,' the Doctor had addressed the vaulted ceiling, raising his voice above the clamour, 'and I can hardly conduct it if you will not show yourself, can I? Why won't you face me? Are you afraid to come out of hiding?'

He had appeared beside them without warning, making the Doctor start. He cut an unassuming figure: a slight, bearded man with flowing auburn hair, clutching the battered helmet that had rendered him invisible. He was naked but for a length of white cloth tied at his waist.

Katarina had begun to relax, seeing that nobody was interested in her, taking refuge in her anonymity. But now, all eyes had turned towards her and her companion. She wished for the floor to open up beneath her. Let her fall into the pit of Tartarus, she no longer cared.

`THE WISDOM OF MY JUDGES IS NOT FOR YOU TO QUESTION,' rumbled Hades.

Òh, it isn't, indeed?' retorted the Doctor:I would have thought the least you could do was to hear this young lady's story. Or do you not care what cruelty is inflicted in your name, hmm?'

Hades' eyes flashed, dangerously, and suddenly he appeared taller, his voice deeper and louder. 'You ARE NOT WELCOME HERE, MORTAL!'

This was her fault. She should have stopped him, should have dissuaded him from this foolhardy course.That was what the gods had expected of her.

`Katarina', said the Doctor, standing his ground,ànswered the call of her gods, at least so she believed. She left her home in a great ship, to

encounter strange creatures in wondrous, far-off lands. She joined me on a quest to recover a fabulous treasure, one that could have brought destruction to all you know. And she laid down her life to keep that treasure out of the hands of those who would have misused it. She died, so that the people of a thousand worlds could live - and yet, you say she does not deserve to be welcomed into your realm as a hero?'

Hades hissed: 'THE GIRL TOOK HER OWN LIFE!' And now, he was taller still, and his voice crackled like flame, filling the great hallway. 'You LOOK

SURPRISED, MORTAL. Do YOU THINK I DO NOT KNOW ALL THAT GOES ON WITHIN MY

KINGDOM? You WOULD DO WELL TO REMEMBER THAT I AM A GOD. Now, BOW DOWN

BEFORE ME!'

Katarina wanted to scream, but the skin of her face was blasted with hot, brimstone-scented air, and her throat was dry. The guests had disappeared, leaving her and the Doctor to face the god's wrath alone.

Hades' head almost touched the ceiling, and he was surrounded by a fiery aura. Before him, the Doctor was of no consequence, an insect beating its wings to allay the oncoming storm. But he did not falter. He drew himself up to his full height, and glared at his gargantuan foe. 'Do you think you frighten me?' he challenged. 'I have spent all my life opposing gods and monsters, and it is my experience that truth and justice will always win through in the end. *That* is what I believe in, my friend, and I bow to nobody and nothing else!'

Katarina closed her eyes, expecting no more than to feel the god's swift retribution.Tartarus would be a mercy, now; more likely, Hades would sear their souls beyond salvation.They would have no existence, in this realm or any other.

`The old man speaks the truth.' A female voice, from somewhere above her head. Katarina hardly dared look - but she did, to see a woman gliding down the staircase: tall and elegant, dressed in expensive silk robes that drifted across the carpet as she moved. Her hair was short and black, tied up behind her head.And Katarina knew her, recognised her as the woman who had spoken to her in Asphodel, only she had been much older then.

'I saw his courage, and his great deeds, in the girl's mind,' said the

goddess.

That is why I had Hypnos bring him here. I was curious about him.'

` You PRESUME TOO MUCH, PERSEPHONE,' growled Hades.`You DEFILE THIS PALACE

BY INVITING IN A LIVING MORTAL, AND THE SPIRIT OF A LOWLY MAIDSERVANT.'

'I did not help them across the river, my husband, nor past your guard dog.They have proved their worth, simply by reaching this hall'

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` THE OLD MAN CHALLENGES MY RULE!'

`He spoke against you in a just cause.' Persephone had reached the Doctor, now. She ran a gentle finger across his cheek, as he eyed her suspiciously.Ìf you cannot see the nobility in that, Hades, then at least you can appreciate the humour of the situation. This fragile being, unarmed and weary, was prepared to battle the gods themselves for the sake of love'

She turned to Katarina, and reached down to her. Trembling, Katarina took her hand and was lifted to her feet, basking in Persephone's affectionate smile. 'As for the girl,' said the goddess, 'I sensed there was something about her, something beyond the experience of either of us, when first I spied her wandering near my grove'

`You SOUND AS IF YOU AGREE WITH THE OLD MAN,' said Hades. He sounded disgruntled, but Persephone had succeeded in partially pacifying him. He was shrinking again, his aura dimming. 'THEN, MY OWN WIFE STANDS AGAINST

ME IN THIS MATTER?'

`Your wife I may be,' said Persephone, firmly. 'I accept this, despite the trickery with which you won me. I accept that I must spend half of each year in this netherworld. But I am also your Queen, Hades, and that gives me some say in the affairs of your kingdom'

`You BELIEVE THE GIRL WAS MISJUDGED?'

Ì do. Katarina did not understand her master's world. She does not consider herself strong or brave - and yet, when called upon to do so,

she made the bravest choice of all'

Hades had returned to human stature now. His expression was mild again, his eyes roaming across his unwanted visitors with keen interest.

Katarina held her breath. Then, the Lord of the Underworld turned away from them, with a shrug, and walked languidly through one of the archways. And his voice drifted back to her: 'So BE IT. Do WITH HER AS YOU

PLEASE'

`The Elysian Fields!'

The words almost caught in Katarina's throat. She put a hand to her chest to steady her heart. She could not believe what she was seeing. Hills and valleys, groves and beaches, lakes and rivers, stretching before her.The sky was a crystal blue, the grass a lush green, and the waters sparkled as if enchanted. There were ghosts here, but they did not wander without aim.They sang and danced, and feasted on fruit or relaxed in the glorious sunlight.And the colours... so deep, so vibrant, so different to the pallid shades that had painted her world in recent days.

`This is your home now,' said Persephone.Then, she turned and walked back through the gateway, into the palace, before Katarina even had a chance to thank her.

The colours called to her, and she went to them, tripping down the shallow slope, the grass moist and cool between her toes. With a guilty exclamation, she stumbled to a halt. She had almost forgotten him. The man who had brought her here.The man who had believed in her.

She turned. The Doctor stood in the gateway, watching her with a **benign** expression. **She would not miss much from her old life, but suddenly she could not face leaving him.**

`Must you go back?' she asked, returning to him.

'I' m afraid I must.There is no place for me here, you must see that: I feel as if I, too, am an outsider. What if the other spirits won't accept me?'

`Nonsense, young lady! You are as deserving of your place here as any other. Thanks to your actions, a great many people can live their lives without fear - and they will remember you, **I** promise. You spent all too short a time in our world, but there will be stories told about your life, **long after you have gone. Anyway -' the Doctor's face creased with humour, you have no choice but to accept this reward. It is the will of the gods, after all:**

Òh, Doctor, I shall miss you!'

Ànd I, you, Katarina:

Ì won't forget all you have done'

He shook his head. 'I did nothing. Nothing at all. You simply had to believe in yourself.You had to accept that what you did, the sacrifice you made, was the **right thing to do. That is what you should remember. You should not think of me as your hero. I am not the hero here.'**

The Doctor's skin lost its colour, then, as his shape lost defmition. His silver hair receded, and his arms and legs shrivelled into his body. Now, he was no more than a blur of wings, and it was with a bittersweet feeling that Katarina watched him flutter away. Another false dream, the embodiment of her most heartfelt desires. How she wished it had been **real.**

She set off down the hill again, the fragrant scents of Elysium wafting up to her on a warm breeze. Still, she could not help but think of the real Doctor, wherever he was. She pictured him, hunched over the mushroom-shaped table in his blue temple, and she wished she could speak to him now She wished she could thank him, and say goodbye.

It could not hurt to try.

`You were wrong, Doctor,' she whispered into the deep, blue sky, 'to say that I achieved this alone. Why else would the gods have chosen your image to guide me? Without your example, I would have remained lost forever.

`You were my inspiration!'

CLIO

The Muse of History

185

The Glass Princess

Justin Richards

On her fifth birthday, Princess Clio started to die.

The palace ballroom was a thick forest of legs and dresses as her father led her proudly to the front. Mother walked beside her, holding her hand.

Mother was wearing her pink dress, the one with the white roses and the lace collar. People applauded and faces dipped into view and smiled. It was her birthday and everything in the world was lovely.

There would be food, drinks, her friends the Archduke's children had come to play. And there would be presents. Mother said that everything would bèjust so' and father had muttered that at least Cousin Malvek was not coming. Clio knew her father's cousin was the Regent of Dolmara and Father did not like him. His name was mentioned in whispers when no one smiled. Anise had told Clio once that if Father died, Clio would be queen. Once she was five. But if Clio then died, Cousin Malvek would be king.

Ànd what if I die before Father?' she had asked her nanny, not knowing what dying was and wondering if it hurt. `Will Cousin Malvek be king then?'

Nanny Anise had smiled, and shaken her head. 'He would become the heir to the throne. But it won't happen that way.'

Clio thought about Cousin Malvek because Uncle Ferdand was there.

His saggy, wrinkled face smiled at her for a moment as she passed before turning quickly away. Uncle Ferdand often visited the Palace, though everyone else called him 'Ambassador'. Father would keep him waiting, and if he saw her, Ferdand would talk quietly and nicely to Clio. They played Ì Spy' in the palace anterooms, and he told her stories of his home on Dolmara. He

told her how many light years away it was, how his children were all grown up with children of their own now He showed her holosnaps of an old lady he called 'Darling', and of his grandchildren.

Clio hoped he thought she was grand too. She hoped he had brought her a present.

At the front of the room, Mother helped Clio up the steps to join her father on the dais. When she turned she could see the people properly, being higher up.There were so many people, and she could see now that they were standing in rows, like pieces on Father's chessboard.There was silence as they waited for Father to speak.

As you know,' he said, 'today is my daughter's birthday. Today she is five years old. The age of heredity, in our ancient law. The age where traditionally she is deemed ready and able to assume the throne.When she 187

is made officially my heir.' His voice was strange today. It was a bit like the voice he used in meetings and speeches and on the holovidcasts. But it was also a bit like the voice he used to Clio and her mother when they were alone. Clio stood still and listened, because that was what princesses did.

`But, as I say, that is ancient law. Whereas today is a celebration, it is a birthday party, not a state event,' Father said. 'And now Clio has a few words of her own, I think'

She was aware of Father looking down at her. He was smiling. She bit her lip, feeling suddenly hot. She hoped she remembered the words properly. She hoped she could speak as loud and clear and slow as Father had shown her. She hoped her dress looked pretty, but Mother was smiling so she knew everything would be all right.

She remembered to look out into the room, not down at her feet. Right at the front of the crowd of people was an old man with long white hair that curled down over the back of his collar. His eyes were alive and his smile was real. Clio had seen lots of smiles that weren't. The old man nodded, just slightly - just enough to say: 'Go on, it'll be all right' His eyes twinkled with encouragement and amusement, and Clio spoke.

`Thank you all for coming to my party' she said. She said it

clearly and loudly and slowly. When she finished, there was silence. Everyone was still looking at her. Clio was not sure what happened next, so she turned to her Mother and said - clearly and loudly and slowly - 'Can I have my presents now?' She could see Uncle Ferdand as she said it. She saw that he was not smiling, and his eyes were not twinkling. 'Please,' she added hurriedly, hoping no one else had noticed her rudeness. It was rude not to say please. Uncle Ferdand's face disappeared behind someone else's shoulder, as if he was looking down at his feet. He wasn't talking, so that was probably all right.

Mother was smiling, and Father laughed, his hand pressing briefly against her back.

Ì think we all know where a child's priorities lie,' he said. Then he started to clap slowly and carefully, nodding and smiling at his daughter as the room erupted into applause. Father leaned down to whisper to Clio as the audience continued to clap. 'Of course you can have your presents now,' he said. 'You've earned them, my little princess'

There were so many presents that after a long time they brought Clio a chair. She sat on her chair on the dais and one by one the people came up, handed her a present, and waited politely and expectantly as Clio opened it.

At first she was careful with the paper. At first she teased the tape and gently undid the ribbon. But before very long she was tearing and ripping into each package. She hardly had time to look at the present before it was 188

gently lifted from her hands and disappeared. On the edge of the dais one of Father's helpers was noting down everything she got. The torn paper and empty boxes also disappeared. Clio hoped they were keeping the best boxes - Allise would make things from them.

Clio was not disappointed with her presents. Many were jewellery, necklaces, ornaments that caught and reflected the light. But there were some toys.The Archduke's children - Alex and Natasha - gave her a game with little figures and a holobook of fairy tales.

The old man at the front of the room had not come up to the dais yet.

He stayed at the front of the room, watching the line of people, nodding and smiling and enjoying Clio opening her presents. But she hardly noticed. She was waiting to see what Uncle Ferdand had brought her. She could see the top of his bald head shining under the chandeliers as he moved closer to her, as the line of people waiting moved slowly along.

`Hello, Uncle Ferdand:

He shrilled back at her. But for once it did not seem like it was a real smile. His hands were damp when she took the box from him. Damp and cold, and trembling. When he blinked, his eyes were pale and watery. He looked so old, Clio thought. 'Happy birthday,' he said quietly, and looked away from her eyes.

The paper tore easily, making a satisfying sound as Clio ripped it away from the polished wooden box. What is it?' She opened the lid and looked eagerly inside. 'Oh - how lovely. Look, Mother.' She held the box so Mother could see inside. Father leaned over too so as to see the slippers.

Two delicate, tiny slippers that glittered as they reflected the light.They looked like they had been carved out of diamond, the facets of the crystal flashing and sparkling as she lifted them from the box.`Can I try them on?

Now? Can I?' She heard Uncle Ferdand catch his breath, and she thought how pleased he must be that she liked them.

Mother helped her take her shoes off, and Father put the slippers down on the floor in front of the chair. The light from them dazzled Clio as she slipped her foot into one of them. It was snug and comfortable, despite being glass or crystal. 'It fits perfectly,' she said.

`They were made especially for you,' Uncle Ferdand said. But he still was not looking at her. Perhaps it was the light shining in her eyes but it seemed to Clio that the old man was almost crying. His lips were pressed tightly together and his eyes were deep, pale wells.

The second shoe fitted as perfectly as the first. Until she eased her foot right inside. Clio gasped, and it seemed as though Ferdand gasped with her.A sudden shooting pain in her big toe as it met the end of the shoe.

She could see her feet inside the slippers, distorted and faceted.There was nothing inside the shoe that could hurt, but she had felt a jab of pain. Like treading on broken glass.

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`What is it?' Mother asked.

Clio pulled the shoe off. 'My toe,' she explained. She looked up to see if Uncle Ferdand was upset, she did not want him to be upset. But he had gone. She looked to her Father, but he was turned away - nodding and gesturing to one of the soldiers at the side of the dais. The soldier was talking into his glove, the way they sometimes did to send messages.

From the back of the room, Clio thought she could hear voices, but Mother was holding her foot in her hand. In the other hand Mother held the slipper.

`Please - may I?'The voice was gentle and kind, old but firm. It was the man who had been watching, the man with the white hair. He lifted the slipper from Mother's hand. Held it up and sniffed cautiously at it, then turned it so he could peer inside. When he tipped it up, a drop of clear liquid formed, grew, dripped.

Clio was feeling tired. Everything blurred as if she had stayed up too late and she felt her eyelids flutter as she tried to keep awake.

À tiny glass needle at the end of the shoe. Hidden by the way the design is cut, you see?' She could barely focus on him now, but the old man sounded pleased with himself.

`What was in it?' Her father's voice.

The old man's reply had lost its enthusiasm. 'I don't know, I'm afraid. I don't know. But I think we should find out, don't you? Hmm?'

`What was in it?' Father asked again, his voice hard and sharp as glass.

But Clio could see that this time he was asking someone else. Someone held by the soldiers. Someone that Clio realised with muzzy surprise was Uncle Ferdand.And he was crying.

`Your highness - I'm sorry,' Uncle Ferdand said between sobs. 'So sorry.'

`Then why?' the white-haired old man asked. 'Why, sir?'

`Because I too have children.And they have children of their own.'

À life for a life?' Father was asking. He sounded like he did when he spoke to the important soldiers sometimes.

The room was empty now, except for the soldiers and Uncle Ferdand, Clio and her parents.And the old man She did not remember the people leaving. 'Is the party over?' she asked the old man who was now holding her foot, looking carefully at her poorly toe.

I'm afraid it may be,' he said.

`How is she, doctor?' Mother asked. He did not reply.

Àm I sick?'

The doctor turned to look at Uncle Ferdand. 'Well?' he asked. 'Is she?'

`She is dying.'

`Does that mean Uncle Malvek will be king?' Clio asked.

Ìt means,' Mother said quietly - so quietly that Clio wondered if she was supposed to hear - 'that there will be war.'

Clio closed her eyes. It must be bedtime. She could look at her presents again tomorrow. She could play with Alex and Natasha tomorrow.Through the gathering sleep, she could hear Uncle Ferdand's voice, though she could hardly make out his words.

It wasn't meant to be like this. She would just hurt her foot. Then natural causes. No blame or anger. Just sorrow and weeping. She shouldn't have put the slipper on, not here, not now. With people watching.'

`But she did, sir,' the Doctor said. And if I am to help her, I need to know what was in that needle.

`She is beyond help.'

Father's anger almost woke her again. 'What was in it?'

Almost. Then she was slipping away once more. Already she must be dreaming, Clio thought.

Senexium Pulverate:

Clio's eyes opened again, just for a moment. Just long enough to see Uncle .Ferdand's trembling hand go to his mouth. Just long enough to look into his brimming eyes.When his hand moved away, he seemed to say:Tm sorry Clio,' only there was no sound. No sound but Father's shout, then the soldier trying to reach into Uncle's mouth, and the foam and his screams, and Ferdand's body falling to the floor.

The doctor's sad smile filled her vision for an instant, then Clio's eyes fluttered shut. Before she slept, she heard his words, as if filtered into her dream:

'I haven't given you *my* present yet, Clio.' And the sounds she heard as she drifted into a long sleep were like Father's pen scratching on the pages of his journal.

Anise was shaking her, ever so gently. Clio opened her eyes, wondering for a moment where she was. It felt like her bed, but above and around it was a cat's cradle of tubes and wires. It seemed to hum and pulse with a life of its own. Like a monster, asleep.

Ìt's time to get up, Clio,'Allise was saying. Her eyes were damp but she was smiling. 'Time for the party.'

`Party?' She was still sleepy as she swung her legs out of bed.

Ì've got your dress ready - look. It's your favourite colour: Ìs it someone's birthday?' Clio had not seen the dress before, but it was lovely and it was red. It sparkled and shone in the soft morning light.

Ìt's *your* birthday,'Allise said.'You are six years old today.'

They were waiting for her in the banqueting hall - Mother and Father, Alex and Natasha with their mother. And another man that Clio did not know, but who grinned at her as if he was an

old friend.

`Happy birthday, my darling: Mother hugged and kissed Clio as soon as she was in the room.

`But that was yesterday,' Clio said. 'We had a party and everything. I want to play with my presents'

For a moment everyone was quiet. Then Father cleared his throat. He looked pale and tired, Clio thought. 'You're right,' he said. 'But now you have a birthday every day.' He looked over at the strange little man with the dark hair and crumpled clothes. 'Isn't that right, doctor?'

The man - the doctor - nodded. That's right'

`You're not the doctor I saw yesterday.'

`No; the man admitted. 'I suppose I'm not. But I know him as well as I know myself.'

'He promised me a present'

`Clio; her Mother murmured.

`He did,' she protested. `But I fell asleep before he gave it to me' She pursed her lips, but she could not stay annoyed for long. 'Is it really my birthday? Is it really my birthday every day?'

Ìt is the doctor said.

`Then I must be the luckiest girl in the world'

Her mother turned away. Alex looked as if he was going to say something, but Natasha nudged him and he looked at the floor.

`So the other doctor promised you a present, did he?'

She nodded.

`The Doctor,' Father said quietly, looking at the little man, at the new doctor, `has given you the best present of all.A gift that we all share in and are the richer for.'

The doctor nodded slowly, then clapped his hands together and

took a few steps towards Clio. 'Yes, well, we shall have to do something about that then, mustn't we. It must be a thing about doctors,' he went on, talking as if only he and Clio were there, as if they had been friends for ever. 'Only, I seem to have forgotten to bring you a present today. So what I'll do is, for your next birthday, I shall bring you three presents'

`Three?'

He smiled. 'One for your last birthday, from the other doctor, one for this birthday from me.And one for the next birthday.'

`But that'll be ages.A whole year.'

Òh no, no, no' He knelt down beside Clio and put his arm round her shoulder. `When you wake up in the morning,' he said gently, 'it will be your next birthday. A birthday every day, remember?' He nodded and smiled to prove it was true.

There were no other guests. Clio played with Alex and Natasha all morning, and then there was a party. But it was just a small party. The presents were nice, but there weren't very many.The food was good, and the grown-ups drank wine and joined in the games. But they did not seem to be enjoying it much. Perhaps, Clio thought, she was having too many 192

birthdays. Perhaps if you had too many birthdays they stopped being fun.

Father had to keep leaving, his helpers bringing him messages that made him quiet or angry.

`Where is *your* father, the Archduke?' she asked Natasha when the ice cream came. Clio was sitting between her friends. Ì like him, he makes me laugh with his stories'

Natasha blinked and frowned. She looked across Clio at Alex. 'He's busy,'

she said. 'He had things to do. Important things'

` More important than my birthday?'

`He's at the war,'Alex said. But as soon as he said it, he looked away, and Natasha was staring at him. 'Well, it's true,' Clio heard Alex mutter.

Àre we having a war?' she asked, confused. But nobody replied.

All too soon it was bed time. Clio said goodnight to everyone and thanked them for coming. Allise took her hand and started to lead her away.

But Clio stopped, turned, looking for the doctor. 'You won't forget,' she called to him 'My presents.Tomorrow.'

He smiled, a small, sad smile. 'I won't forget'

`You promise?'

'I promise. Sleep well. I shall see you in the morning'

Clio was tired. It was hard work, having a birthday.Allise tucked her into bed. Then she fussed round the tubes and the wires, and did things to a metal box on a table by the window.

`What are you doing?' Clio asked sleepily.

Clio.Ìll `Just making sure you get a good sleep,' her nanny replied. 'Good night, see you...' She paused, as if she had forgotten what she was going to say. 'Soon,' she decided. 'I'll see you soon'

Then Allise drew the curtains, and Clio slept. Until her next birthday.

`Why can't I wear the dress I wore yesterday?' Clio wanted to know. The new dress that Allise had shown her was blue. She preferred red.

Ìt won't fit you,'Allise said as if the question was silly.

`But it fitted me yesterday.'

For a while,Allise did not answer. Then she said: Ì like the blue. It goes so well with your eyes. Why don't you wear it. For me. Just try it on, you'll look beautiful'

Allise seemed shorter than she had the day before, Clio thought as she held her nanny's hand to go downstairs. So did everyone else when she went into the banqueting hall Except Natasha and Alex. They seemed taller - Natasha was up to her mother's shoulder.

Perhaps that was why Natasha's mother was so sad. She tried to hide it, but Clio could tell. She watched the woman turn away to dab at her eyes with a hanky. She looked so tired. Maybe Clio should lend her the special bed.

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The other person who was taller was the Doctor. Now he was as dignified as a palace courtier, dressed in velvet and wearing a cape. Clio knew who he was from the way he smiled at her when she came into the room. Everyone else seemed to have to remember to smile when they saw her, but not the Doctor. His joy was immediate and complete. He clapped his hands together when Clio entered, and then everyone else clapped too.Allise must be right - the dress made her look beautiful. Clio squeezed her nanny's hand.

She turned a full circle to let them see the dress properly, delighted at the continued applause.

`Happy birthday,' Mother said in her happy-sad voice. Father nodded and smiled, and looked tired like Natasha and Alex's mother. His jacket seemed to be sagging at the shoulders.

'Anise says my other dress won't fit me,' Clio said. 'But I wore it yesterday, for my last birthday.'

There was silence at this.The applause had stopped and the smiles were frozen.

Aft but now you're a year older,' the Doctor said. 'You're seven now. A seven-year-old can't wear the same dress they had when they were six, now, can they? Any more than a butterfly could fit back into its chrysalis.'

He was funny, this new Doctor. He did conjuring tricks - made coins disappear then reappear behind Clio's ear, or on his own tongue. He laughed and drank wine with the grown-ups and they all seemed happier this year. And he had brought the presents.

Ì tried to think of things that were appropriate to the giver,' he told Clio as he handed her the three wrapped boxes.

The first present was a brooch. It was large and gold and inset with coloured stones. 'It's a bit big, I'm afraid,' the Doctor said. 'But it will look good on you when you're... older. It's to show

that the First Doctor loved you.'

`Father said he gave me a present already,' Clio said as she held the brooch so it caught the light. It reminded her of the slippers, and she was careful not to prick her finger on the pin. 'But I don't know what it was'

Ìt was your bed.Your special bed,' her mother told her. 'It was a gift to us all'

The Doctor's second present was a musical pipe. He showed her how to position her fingers and blow through it to make the notes. For a moment, as she tried to play a tune, he looked sad.

Ì' m sorry,' he said, seeing her expression. 'I was just remembering. I once gave one of these to someone else. Someone I greatly admired. It was the best gift I could have given him, but it wasn't really enough.

Sometimes,' he said, looking at Clio's mother, 'you can only do so much.

And that can be very sad.'

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The third box was empty. 'There's nothing in it,' Clio exclaimed in surprise. 'You forgot the present.'

Òh no I didn't.' The Doctor sat down beside her, and took one of her hands in both of his. 'You see, the third present is something that is intangible.That means you can't see it, or smell it, or taste it even. But it's there. It's always there.'

`What is it?'

Ìt's hope.'

Clio looked into the box again, turning it slowly, hoping to catch a quick glimpse of the hope inside. But he was right, she could see nothing. She put the lid carefully back on the box. 'I'll keep it safe, always'

The Doctor nodded and smiled. 'Good: he said. 'Because, although it may not always seem like it, while there's life, there's always hope'

He stood up suddenly, as if embarrassed, and looked round. 'Now, I must fmd your father and say goodbye' He was holding something else in his hand , now - a metal rod of some sort which he tapped on the palm of his other hand.

`What's that? Is it a magic wand?'

'I suppose so, in a way,' he admitted, amused.'I was going to have a quick look at your special bed before I go.Ah - there he is'

Father had come back now, and the Doctor strode across to him. Clio could just hear his words as he called to Father.

Ìt's time I was going, I'm afraid. But I'll take a quick look at the stasis generator before I leave. I've an idea that might slow the exponential energy drain. Or at least allow her to move further from the generator when she's awake without hastening the process...'

Alex was talking to her now, so Clio could not hear any more of what the Doctor said. Which was a pity She liked his voice.

Ì'll see you next year,' Alex said. 'Natasha has had to take Mother back to the ship. She's...' He shook his head. 'It's been a bad time:

`Don't be silly,' Clio told him 'I'll see you tomorrow.Won't 'Anise? I'll see you tomorrow - at my next birthday.'

'Yes,'Alex said. He was looking at Allise, not at Clio. 'That's what I meant.

I'll see you tomorrow?

Clio watched him walk stiffly away. He seemed so tall. He was walking like a soldier now

`You should say goodnight to your parents: Anise said. 'It's nearly time for bed:

It snowed on Clio's eighth birthday. She watched the tiny flakes spiralling down outside the window as the grown-ups talked quietly and drank wine.Alex was not there, nor was his mother. But Natasha had come. She was so tall now

The Doctor too seemed taller, larger. His face was one huge smile

topped by a floppy hat and framed by a multi-coloured scarf. He laughed and joked and gave her jelly babies - a whole big bag of sweets for her present.

By the middle of the afternoon, it was getting dark outside. Clio could see the snow was deep and crisp and unbroken by footprints when she looked out of the window. Just a few days ago, she had to stand on the window seat to peer over the stone sill and see down into the palace courtyard, but now she could see easily without having to climb. It must be because she was eight.

`Beautiful, isn't it?' the Doctor said, surprisingly quietly. 'So delicate, so soft. So cold.' He sat down on the window seat so he was almost the same height as Clio.

Ìt doesn't usually snow on my birthday.'

`But this time your birthday is in winter.'

Ìs that why it's getting dark now?'

Ìt's been getting dark for a very long time,' the Doctor murmured.Then he smiled again, his sudden sadness gone. It's my fault, I'm afraid. I was a little late for your party, but you waited.You're very kind.'

`Did I? Can I go out to play in the snow?'

The Doctor nodded and stared out of the window. 'I would like to say yes, but I'm afraid I don't think that would be a good idea. We need to keep you warm and safe indoors, I think. Besides, as you said, it's getting dark.'

Clio was disappointed, but she tried not to show it. 'I like the jelly babies,' she said.

`They're my favourite too,' he confided.`Be sure to eat them all up today, won't you. They won't be nice when you wake up.'

Natasha hardly spoke to Clio the whole day. She seemed sad, and Clio saw her Mother put an arm round Natasha although they were almost the same height. Clio wanted to talk to Natasha, to ask her what was wrong.

But when she asked where Alex was, her friend ran away, her

hands to her face. Father hugged Clio, singing 'Happy Birthday' to her in a voice that sounded like it came bubbled through water.

As it got darker, a helper came and lit candles. He was the only one of Father's helpers that Clio saw. She watched as he went round the room with a taper, his hand cupped round it to stop it blowing out as he moved.

`Why are we having candles?' she asked. 'Is it because it's my birthday?'

He looked at her as if it was a silly question. But Clio didn't think it was.

`Please tell me,' she said.

`We have to save energy,' he said. 'The generators can barely provide enough to keep -'

But before he could say any more, Mother arrived and told the man to get on with his work. She led Clio back to the table, where the Doctor was 196

waiting. He was leaning back, rocking his chair like Alex's mother told Alex not to. His feet were up on the table, and Father was listening to his deep booming voice.

Ìt's the starting and stopping that's the problem, that's what takes the power; he was saying,Ànd of course as the process speeds up as the day goes on, so the energy need increases for the evening.The long night.You may have to consider waiting a while longer, before you next...'

His voice stopped abruptly as he saw Clio:

'It was three years last time,' Father was saying, but he seemed to be saying it to himself. And we built another two generators. We can't afford to do that again, it's taking resources we need at the front.' He wiped his face with his hands, and he looked so old and tired.

`Hello there,' the Doctor said loudly to Clio, whipping his feet off the table and sitting suddenly upright. 'Have you had a nice birthday?'

Allise was waiting for Clio. It was bedtime, she said.There were

lines on her face that Clio had not seen before. Lighter streaks in her fair hair.

Clio had two jelly babies left. A red one and a yellow one. She put the yellow one on the shelf with her books, standing watch over her as she slept.And when Allise wasn't looking, Clio tucked her last jelly baby under her pillow. It would sleep soundly there. Until tomorrow. Until her next birthday.

As soon as Allise woke her, Clio slipped her hand under her pillow. The jelly baby was warm and safe, and Clio popped it into her mouth as she climbed out of bed.The room seemed dark, and Allise was standing in the shadows, as if afraid to come into the room.

Ì put out a dress for you,' she said. Her voice seemed husky and strange.

Perhaps she had a cold, Clio thought - it had been winter yesterday.

But this morning the pale rays of the weak sun were scattering light across the bedroom floor. Clio could see specks of dust spiralling down through the light. Everywhere seemed dusty. She could see her footmarks on the floor as she put on her shoes. Except they had shrunk and she could not get her feet into them.

`They're waiting for you downstairs:Allise said in her cracked voice, and she turned to go before Clio had finished dressing,Ì'll see you there.'

`Please wait for me,' Clio said. She skipped over to the shelf as she pulled on her dress. It seemed awkward somehow, organising her arms to do what she wanted.The shelf seemed lower than she remembered, but the yellow jelly baby was still there, watching her from beneath a layer of dust. Clio picked it up and blew gently to get the dust off. She should not eat it, she thought, not if it was dusty like that. It was hard and brittle beneath her fingers, and she decided that it might not taste as nice as the red one had. So she put it back beside the fairy tales, and hurried to catch up with Allise.

`My shoes don't fit.'

Allise did not answer. She was standing at the top of the stairs. As Clio reached her, she saw that her nanny's hair was almost white now The woman seemed stooped and bent. Clio tried to stifle a gasp, tried not to show her surprise. Was Allise ill? She seemed so old and so small and fragile. Clio carefully took her hand and together they walked down the stairs, leaving prints in the dust and avoiding the cobwebs.

There were two soldiers at the bottom of the staircase - one either side.

Other soldiers stood by the doors from the hall They were not Clio's father's men, the uniforms were different. They were like the one Uncle Ferdand used to wear, but with less colour on the sleeves and no medals on the chest.

Father was waiting with Clio's mother. Clio was surprised to see that her mother's hair was grey - almost as white as Allise's had become.

Perhaps they had all been ill. Father's hair was white, and brushed in thin wisps across his head.

When Mother hugged Clio, she seemed so fragile and thin Father hugged her too, but it was nothing like the tight bearhug she was expecting. He seemed so weak and drained. When she pulled away, Clio's cheek was wet, and she brushed at it with the back of her hand.

The Doctor was the only person who seemed younger. Natasha was there too, although it took Allise a few moments to recognise her.

`You're so grown-up,' she told her friend. 'How old are we now?'

`You are nine,' Natasha said gently. She smiled, but it seemed a sad smile Ànd I am nineteen.'

Clio shook her head. 'You're four years older than me,' she said. She tried to count it out on her fingers.

Ì've had birthdays too,' Natasha said. 'While you've been sleeping'

`Don't be silly.There aren't enough days. I have a birthday every day.'

`You're probably nearer ten, actually.'The Doctor's voice was gentle and kind. He smiled, looking younger even than Natasha when he did. 'There's no longer a direct correlation, you see, as the process speeds up and the energy demands increase' His smile seemed to freeze. 'I'm sorry, where are my manners. Let me introduce myself.'

`You're the Doctor,' Clio said. Ì can tell.'

`You can? Oh well, I suppose that's a good thing'

`Did you bring me a present?'

He seemed confused for a moment. A present?' He frowned and his eyes widened. Oh, a present, of course.Yes.A present' Clio wondered if he had forgotten where he had put it; they both looked round the room. 'Here,'

the Doctor said at last, and he pulled something from his lapel and handed it to her.

`What is it?' It looked like a plant, a vegetable maybe.

It's a stick of celery.You keep it for good luck. Like a rabbit's foot'

À what?'

`Yes, well, never mind.You just keep it safe. It will bring you luck.'

Clio thought she heard her father give a short laugh at that. But when she looked, his face was stern.

Ì'll tell you a secret; the Doctor said quietly. He had put on a pair of spectacles, but they seemed only half finished, only the bottom of the lenses was there. He was examining the celery that Clio was holding:That stick of celery,' said quietly, 'doesn't really exist, you know.'

It felt very real to Clio, but she nodded as if she understood. 'Is it like the hope you gave me?' she asked. Ì still have that safe upstairs in its box, although it's getting a bit dusty now'

Ì know the feeling,' the Doctor murmured. 'Yes, luck and hope often go together:

'I think', Clio's mother said quietly as she joined them to look at the celery, 'that we have none of either.'

The Doctor nodded grimly, then forced a smile. 'Oh, look on the bright side, there's always a silver lining' He grinned widely. `Never say...' But the grin thinned to a smile, to nothing, as his voice faded away.

There was not much to eat, just bread and cheese. Clio had been waiting to see if Natasha was allowed wine now she was so old, but nobody had any.

`Why are Cousin Malvek's soldiers here?' Clio asked. She did not really want to know, but everyone was so quiet. It was her party, so perhaps it was up to her to make the conversation.

`They are here to look after us; Mother said, glancing at the soldiers by the main doors, then looking quickly away again.

`To look after me, in particular,' Father said. He came the closest Clio had seen so far today to a smile. Ì think the Doctor's arrival has rather unsettled them.'

`Yes, I do seem to have that effect sometimes,' the Doctor agreed.

Ànd no doubt there will soon be the usual dire warnings about energy consumption and lists of other crimes and misdemeanours to be accounted for:

Mother put her hand over Father's, which was bunched into a fist on the table. Father looked down at it, shook his head:I'm sorry,' his face said, but he said nothing out loud.

Clio's birthdays were getting shorter. Anise took her back to her room soon after they had eaten. There were no games, no jokes, no tricks. Just stern faces and silence. She hoped her next birthday would be happier.

`You said I was nearer ten,' Clio told the Doctor as he solemnly shook her hand and said good night. 'How old will I be at my next birthday?'

The Doctor opened his mouth to answer, but then closed it again.

Perhaps he was not sure. He looked at Clio's mother and father. Mother looked away. Father sighed.

Ì don't know,' the Doctor said. He seemed to be talking to her parents rather than to Clio. But I promise that you will have another birthday. I'll tell you how old you are when you wake up.'

Ìn the morning? You'll be here?'

He pretended to be hurt. Aren't I always?'

She hugged the Doctor, and he seemed the least fragile of all of them.

He hugged her back, tight like Father used to. Natasha held her tightly too, but her body seemed to shake as they embraced, and she could not say good night. She just shook her head and looked at the floor as Allise led Clio slowly, haltingly, up the stairs to bed.

The small yellow figure had crumbled. Clio could feel it disintegrating under her fingers as she picked it up. If she blew the dust off it again, she thought, the jelly baby might blow away as well.

And if she blew the dust off Allise, her nanny too might fall apart. The woman was old now, so very old. Her face was lined and her eyes were pale. She walked with the help of a stick.

`How old am I today?' Clio remembered what the Doctor had said. She was taller - much taller than she had been. Her body seemed to have changed shape. It was a strange thing - a few days ago she had been celebrating her fifth birthday, and now...

Ìt's quite a complex calculation,' the Doctor told her when she met him in the banqueting hall a few minutes later. 'Fortunately for someone of my mathematical expertise it's the matter of only a moment to sort the exponential curve induced by the Senexium Pulverate and then retard that to take account of the temporal suppression field.You have to factor in the energy dissipation of course, and then there's the actual passage of time'

`So how old am I this birthday?'

Allise did not answer, and Clio did not ask her again. The celery

stick was as fresh and moist as when the Doctor had given it to her yesterday, she noticed. She sniffed at it, but it smelled of nothing. Nothing but the dust and decay that was everywhere.

This Doctor was large and loud. But he seemed as friendly as any of the others. His round face wore an apparently permanent air of confidence while his coat suggested the wit and joy of a jester. It looked as though the scarf he had on her eighth birthday had somehow grown over his whole body. Even his hair was bursting with life. It was a contrast to Mother's white hair, and her weary, old face. Natasha too looked old and tired. So much must have happened in a night, so much while she slept.

`Thirteen,' the Doctor decided. 'You're a teenager now, Clio' He winked at her theatrically. 'But no tantrums mind'

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Again it was the Doctor who did most of the talking and joking and laughing. He told Clio outrageous stories about his adventures on other worlds. He explained how clever he had been on so many occasions, and how he had saved worlds and civilisations and people.

`But not us,' Mother said quietly, and for the briefest of instants the Doctor's mood had dropped and his face had darkened as if a storm was about to break.

In the lull that followed, Clio asked: 'When is Father coming?' When f\ nobody answered, she said: 'He never misses my birthdays. I bet he was here for the ones in the night that I missed'

Natasha sat with her mouth open, like she used to when Alex said something silly. Clio had not seen Alex for several birthdays now 'Why is everyone going away?' she wondered.

`Yes; Mother said. 'Your father has gone away.'

Will he be here for my next birthday?' Clio was sad, but she knew that Father was busy and important. She knew he would get to her party if he possibly could, and she wondered what could be so urgent that it kept him away.

No one said anything. Until the Doctor suddenly slapped his forehead with the palm of his hand. `Your present!' he exclaimed,

leaping to his feet.

There was only one soldier by the door for this birthday, and he blinked, startled as the Doctor moved. For a second, Clio wondered what he had at his belt that his hand quickly went to. But the Doctor was already reaching across the table to her - handing her something.

It was a piece of cloth, thick like felt. Black. It was cut into a shape, and Clio held it up to see what it was.The silhouette of an animal - she could see its legs and its body and its head and imagined where its eyes would be.

Ìt's a cat; the Doctor explained. 'A cat that walks always alone. It will watch over you while you sleep.You are very alike, you know.'

'I am like a cat?'

'He means you are alone,' Natasha said. Her voice was hard, but not unkind. Her face was pale and there were dark patches under her eyes.

She looked, Clio thought, like Mother had looked on her sixth birthday

`While you sleep, and life goes on around you and you don't know about it. Life,' Natasha said again quietly. Ànd death.'

Clio frowned. She did not understand what Natasha meant, but she said nothing. So many things were confusing her today. Like where her father had gone, and why Mother and Allise were so old; why Natasha was sharp with her, and why the Doctor pretended so hard to be happy and confident when she could see in his eyes the depth of his sadness and his self-doubt. If anyone there walked alone, it was this Doctor.

She was also confused by how her hands could hold the large knife and 201

fork and spoon so comfortably today when only yesterday they had been too big and heavy. She felt awkward at being so tall as she sat at the table

- her eyes almost level with Natasha's now.

But she was grateful for the present, and it came as a surprise to realise that for the past few birthdays the only presents she had been given were from the Doctor. He took her hand and led her upstairs to her bedroom.

'Allise usually puts me to bed,' Clio told him, her Mother's kisses still wet on her cheeks.

Ànise is tired. Soon she will rest too.A long sleep.A very long sleep.The years have taken their toll'

`You mean the birthdays?'

The Doctor held her hand ever so slightly tighter.Ì mean the birthdays,'

he agreed. He raised her hand in his, to her lips, and kissed it like the courtiers used to kiss Mother's hand.

`Why did you do that?' Clio wanted to know as she climbed into bed.

The Doctor had turned away while she undressed, which she also thought was strange. 'Why did you kiss my hand?'

`Because you are a princess,' he said. Ànd because it is your birthday.And because...' He was fiddling with the controls for the bed, like Allise did every night. 'Goodnight, Clio,' he said, his voice quieter than she had imagined was possible after the bluster and the stories. She closed her eyes, and if she felt the brush of his lips on her cheek kissing her goodnight, then that too was far more gentle than she would have believed of him. But perhaps it was just a breath of air come to hasten her to sleep and to blow away the bad dreams.

The Doctor was still there when she woke, and Clio wondered if she had slept at all. No sooner had she closed her eyes than she seemed to sense the sunlight falling across them, and she was awake again.

She knew she had slept, at least for a while, by the Doctor. Now he was a small man with a strange hat perched on top of his dark hair. He raised the hat and smiled as he watched her opening her eyes.Then he jammed it back down on his head.

'Is it morning?'

Èvening more like.The sun is setting'

It was not until he said this that Clio realised the sun was shining in through the window on the other side of the room. The light threw shadows across the Doctor's face. She saw that as he leaned over her, he was resting on a walking stick. The handle was stylised, red. There was material wrapped round the stick, bulking it out.

`Did Allise find me a nice dress to wear today?'

He smiled, but it was a sad smile. 'Yes,' he said. 'And no. She left a dress out for you, but I don't think it will fit.And Anise isn't here today.'

`Not here?'That couldn't be right.Allise was always there. Clio could not remember a day ever that Allise had not been there.

The Doctor had turned and was watching the setting sun. 'No,' he said quietly, almost mumbling to hiinself. 'I'm afraid she had to go away. We all do,' he added as he turned back. 'One day.'

`What will I wear?' Clio wondered, hoping Allise would be back soon.

For her next birthday perhaps.

Ì found a dress in your mother's wardrobe that I think will fit you.And some other things too' He stepped back and pointed to the dress, hanging on the back of the bedroom door. It looked lovely. It looked enormous.

Clio gasped.

`How old am I now?'

`Well, that's an interesting question' He tapped the handle of his stick on his chin for a moment before reaching down the dress and laying it across the bottom of the bed, next to more of her mother's things - shoes, gloves, underwear. It was pale green, velvet, beautiful.

`You get dressed,' the Doctor said. 'I'll wait outside'

Ì can dress myself,' Clio admitted proudly. She got out of bed. She

felt odd, being so big. The Doctor was standing outside the door, and she could hear his voice clearly as she dressed, fumbling with the strange buttons and clasps.

`You and I are very alike, you know,' the Doctor was saying. 'I knew a man - a very dear friend - whose children never tired of asking him how old he was.And he always gave them the same answer:

`No one stays the same age for ever,' Clio said.

That's very true. But what he always told them when they asked him was: "I'm as old as my tongue, and a little bit older than my teeth."Which was true of course' She heard him chuckle. 'But not very helpful'

Ì'm ready now.'

`You look beautiful' He took several moments to admire her, and Clio giggled with embarrassment. `But while it was true for him, it wouldn't be a true answer for me'

Clio frowned. 'Have your teeth all gone then?'

`No' He smiled at this.`No, they are all my own. But it wouldn't be a true answer for you either. Not really:

`Wouldn't it?' She took his hand and they walked together across the dusty landing towards the dusty staircase.Their feet echoed on the marble floor.

Ìt depends what you mean by "old" really. Your body is like mine - it's a different age to your mind. And then the length of elapsed time since you were born, that's different again. Like me'

Clio did not understand what he meant, so she just nodded and said nothing.

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`Time plays tricks on us all, the Doctor said quietly as they arrived in the banqueting hall.

It looked like a different room.There was no light except the dying sun filtered through the grimy windows, casting long shadows across the dusty floor. It picked out the cobwebs and the

film of dirt on the surfaces.

Even the table was covered in dust.

There was an old woman sitting at the table. Her head was buried in her hands, her elbows on the table, her white hair cascading round her so that her face was hidden. When she looked up, she seemed tired and sad.

Slowly, falteringly, she got to her feet and shuffled round the table towards Clio and the Doctor. Her chair toppled backwards as she moved, falling with a muffled thud and sending up a shower of dust.

`Clio, my darling: Her voice was cracked and dry and brittle - like her smile Her eyes were pale and almost empty.

It was the dress that Clio recognised - pink, with white roses and a lace collar. 'That's my mother's favourite dress,' she said, more surprised than accusing.

The old woman paused. She had left trails in the dust where her feet shuffled along. She looked from Clio to the Doctor and back, her eyes brimming.

`Clio,' the Doctor said quietly, 'you remember what I said about the tricks that time plays.Tempus fugit,' he murmured. 'This *is* your mother.'

And as soon as he had said it, she could see that it was true. And she cried, and her mother cried, and the Doctor looked like he was about to cry but never quite did. Instead, he reached into his pocket and took out a small bag.When he upended the bag over her waiting hands, her present fell out.

`The old Doctor sent me a brooch; she told him The very first Doctor, who gave me the special bed. He sent it with one of the other Doctors.'

But the brooch which this Doctor had given her was much smaller. White plastic in the shape of a shield.There was a blue design on it, but Clio did not know what it was supposed to be.

Ìt's a ship,' the Doctor said. Seeing her surprise, he explained:Not a ship like you know. One that goes on water, rather than between the planets.'

Òn water?'

He helped her pin it on her dress. 'It belonged to a friend of mine'

The one with his own teeth?'

Ànother friend. A young lady. Like you. But she said she didn't need it any more and that you should have it. She said to tell you that you had deserved it. It's a badge really, not a brooch. It's only given to people who are very special. Very brave:

Am I very special and very brave?'

The Doctor stepped back to admire the badge-brooch.`You'd better ask 204

your mother; he said. But Mother was still crying softly, trying to smile through the tears.

`You're all grown-up,' she said. `My little girl, grown-up at last. I've waited so long:

Which seemed strange to Clio, who had grown up so very quickly.

Nobody else came to the party. The sun dipped out of sight and the Doctor lit the only candle. Its flickering light helped them see their way back up to the bedroom. It was a slow journey, as Mother had to hold the Doctor's and Clio's arms for support and let them help her up the stairs.

`Keep the dress on; Mother said. And your brooch:

It's a badge,' Clio told her. `The Doctor said so:

`Your badge then,` She tried to smile.Ìt will be morning soon. No point in wasting time getting undressed: She turned to the Doctor, took his arm and led him a step or two away from the bed.

`Just once more. Can't we? Once more before the power finally...'

But the Doctor was shaking his head sadly. His voice was barely a whisper in the near-darkness. If she wakes again, there will be no power to restabilise the fields. I'm sorry'

Mother looked at him for a while. The she shuffled back to the

bed, where Clio was waiting, her arms out to embrace her mother, kiss her good night one last time.

`Good night, my darling:

`Good night, Mother. I love you.'

`Sweet dreams,' Mother said. But her words were almost swallowed by the threat of tears.

Ì'll see you tomorrow,' Clio assured her. She did not like to see Mother so sad. Allise will be back then.And Father.And the others: Perhaps her mother answered. Clio did not know. Her eyes began to close, and somewhere in the distance the Doctor blew out the candle.

`Let me tell you a story,' the Doctor said as he led her to the door.

`Does it have a happy ending?' Clio wanted to know.

'In a way.'

Ì like stories with happy endings.' The dress still fitted her, Clio was surprised to find. Perhaps, as Mother had said, she had only slept a short while and not missed any more birthdays.Wait a minute: She ran to check her hope was still in its box on the bookcase. It was smothered in dust but the small box was there.

Ònce upon a time,' the Doctor said.They were on the landing now. All the best stories start like that,' he told her in a low voice. In his storytelling voice he went on: `There was a princess:

The stairs were layered with dust, so that it puffed up at their feet as they walked.The carpet had shredded almost to nothing.

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Ànd this princess was unlucky enough to prick her finger on a brooch, and so she went to sleep for a thousand years'

Clio giggled, but it sounded more like a grown-up laughing,`That's silly,'

she said. 'Nobody sleeps for a thousand years.'

The Doctor shrugged. 'Maybe it was a million'

Àll right'

Ànyway, her family didn't want her to sleep, they wanted her to wake up. But she was under a spell that would kill her if she didn't sleep. So to stop her dying they attached a spinning wheel to her bed, to stop the spell'

À spinning wheel?'

Ìt's just a story.'

The banqueting hall seeined to be empty. There was no sound from downstairs, just the muffled tread of their feet in the dust.

Ànyway, they could not keep stopping and starting the spinning wheel or the bobbin would wear out'

`What's a bobbin?'

Ìt's the bit that would wear out'

`So what did they do'

`Well, they woke her once or twice, when they could. But after a while it was less and less until they could no longer wake her up at all'

Ànd what happened then?'

Clio was wrong. There *was* someone in the room. Sitting at the table, head slumped forward.A woman in a faded, dusty dress that might once have been pink. As Clio approached she could see a faint tracery of lines

- like branches - that covered the dress. And she could see what might once have been white roses but they had turned deathly pale and withered in the pattern.The lace that had trimmed the collar was frayed and fractured, so it looked like tiny brittle broken bones. And inside the dress...

She could guess. 'They all died, didn't they?'

The Doctor gently led her away from the table, towards the door. 'I'm afraid they did.' He was a younger Doctor this time. His face was long, but not unhappy. He looked used to smiling. His hair was bouncing with life and his voice had a soft edge to it.

`So what happened? To the princess? In the story?'

`Well...' He seemed to think about this, hesitating in the doorway:There was one person who did not die'

Clio clapped her hands together. A prince'

Ìf you like'

Was he handsome?'

The Doctor seemed surprised at the question. 'Well, I suppose he was.

In a way.Yes:

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`What did the handsome prince do?'

'He made a choice. That may not sound very heroic, but it is the most important thing that princes do. And the hardest. He had to decide whether to let the princess - who was very beautiful, by the way, did I say that? He had to decide whether to let her sleep forever, or to wake her up.

But he knew that if he woke her, the spinning wheel would stop forever...'

She listened, mouth open attentive. The bobbin would break?'

He nodded:And there was no one left to repair it or find a new one. But the prince, he decided to wake her anyway.'

They crossed the courtyard, towards the main gates. One of them was slightly open.The other was rotted and had begun to collapse.

`So the prince went to the castle where the princess was sleeping. But because of a fault in his horse's, er, navigational systems, he arrived *outside* the castle, not inside.And he found that a huge forest had grown up in the years she had slept. So he took his sword and although it was a bit rusty and he was a bit out of practice, he hacked his way through the trees until he found the castle.'

Clio followed the Doctor out through the gate. She had not been

outside the castle before. Not ever. She rested her hand on the cold stone of the gateway as she went through. It looked like someone else's hand -

the blue veins just visible beneath the smooth surface, the nails long and elegant...

Outside there was a wood - trees growing closely together, their branches intertwined and overlapping. Every now and again Clio could see small white roses peeping through the foliage, and she was careful not to prick herself on the thorns as she followed the Doctor.

There was a narrow path through the wood. He was waiting for her, and when she reached him, Clio could see that there were other paths through the wood too.

`They don't really go anywhere,' the Doctor told her. 'I think whoever cut them was a bit lost. Or perhaps they were not really sure they wanted to reach the castle after all.'

`Can I run and play?'

His smile almost swallowed his face. 'Of course you can.That's what the wood is for.'

`We mustn't run indoors.'

`But now we're outdoors. We can run and skip and shout for joy and play hide and seek:

`Can't catch me,' she shrieked, and was off.

The Doctor ran after her, but he wasn't really trying. He let her win every time. Until she was out of breath and the smooth skin on the back of her hand was slack and lined.

`So why did the prince wake her up?' They were walking slowly along the path.The Doctor was pulling petals from a rose, one by one, dropping them like snowflakes to the ground.

`He thought very long and very hard about just letting her sleep, about sparing her the pain and the knowledge. He let her sleep while civilisations came and went, while empires rose and fell.

Until all the birthdays and parties were over.' The rose was just a green stem now, a single thorn jutting out from its side:But then he thought about what she was missing - not the passage of history, but her own life. He thought about how she should be able to run and skip and shout for joy and play hide and seek. For once' He was smiling, twisting the rose stem in his fingers. But it was a less of a smile now. Tor last'

Clio ran on ahead, laughing again, catching hold of a slender tree trunk and twirling round it, her dress billowing out in joy.

`He thought of her just lying there, slowly but surely getting older day by day, and he thought of his own day by day life.'

She ran up behind him and tapped him on the shoulder, running off as he swung round and tried to catch her.

`He decided, I suppose, that you have to live life to the fullest you can, not just sit back and let it all go by.You need to be out there doing it, not stuck indoors, watching it.That's why.'

She skipped on ahead through the forest. But her feet were heavy and she was feeling tired. Her fingernails had broken on the trees and her hands were blotched and weak and wrinkled.

Ìt's about having the choice. About doing what's right. About enjoying yourself. Enjoying life'

There was a but at the end of the path. She was making her way there through the trees, ducking behind them and jumping out at the Doctor.

But it was an effort now She took his hands in hers and let him swing her round.

`Ring a ring a roses,' he sang, his eyes bright and dainp.

À pocket full of posies.'The trees flashed past, and she could feel herself sagging in his grasp.

À-tissue, a-tissue.' She tried to speak, to tell him how much fun she was having - how this was the best present of all, ever. But her voice was a dry croak, like her Mother's had been that last tiine.

`We all fall down' And she slumped to the floor, her dress

spreading round her.

They were alinost at the but now, and the Doctor scooped Clio up as if she was a little girl again, as if she was just five. As he did so, just for a frozen instant, she thought she caught sight of her mother reflected in the moisture of his eyes - an old, lined face. Smiling, but tired.Trembling and frail.

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`Sweet dreams, Clio; the Doctor said quietly, and he bent to kiss her. The last thing she heard, as she slipped into sleep, was a wounded animal somewhere in the distance, howling with pain. And the last thing she felt was the warm damp rain on her face.As her handsome prince kissed Clio good night.

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